Virtual Influencers and the New Wave of Digital Labour Exploitation

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Graduate Program in Communications and Culture

York University

Toronto, ON

Abstract

Virtual influencers (VIs) are animated replacements for human social media influencers, with popular VIs like Lil Miquela garnering millions of followers. This thesis explores the unaddressed ways VIs enable the exploitation of the human labourers creating them. As human influencers have become more powerful and expensive to work with brands and marketers have sought to regain control over them. The behind the scenes workers creating VIs have limited ownership of the characters they create, and a system of NDAs, job insecurity, and exploitation of worker passion discourages workers from discussing labour conditions. These conditions complicate primary research on VI creators, pushing me towards influencer studies and digital labour literature as the unit of analysis for my exploration of labour conditions in the VI industry. Political economy, emotional capitalism, and affect theory frameworks guide this analysis. I argue that the labour ecosystem surrounding VIs represents concerning future trends in labour exploitation.

Acknowledgments

I would like to start by thanking my partner, Emily. Thank you for all the little treats, walking the dog so I could sleep in, and everything else that you do. Thank you to my parents, for supporting me in my move halfway across the country and lending a sympathetic ear when I was overwhelmed. And thank you to my many friends from home: Kieran and Jessica, Rylan, Amity, Travis, and Sam for continuing our long-lasting friendships both online, and when able, in person.

Thank you to my thesis supervisor Dr. Kelly Bergstrom for her much needed patience, suppor,t and encouragement throughout this process. Thank you also to the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Ganaele Langlois and Dr. sava saheli singh at York University, and Dr. Opeyemi Akanbi at Toronto Metropolitan University for your insights and criticisms. Finally, a thank you to Dr. Dan Downes and Dr. June Madeley at the University of New Brunswick for encouraging me to pursue graduate studies and writing numerous reference letters for me.

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Chapter One

Introducing: Lil Miquela

The American clothing and lifestyle brand Calvin Klein is notorious for its sexually charged marketing campaigns. The brand essentially invented the designer underwear market in the 1980s by plastering images of rail-thin women next to men with superhero-class physiques dressed in nothing but the brand's white briefs. By these standards, a campaign they ran in spring 2019, where fashion model Bella Hadid, wearing a cropped t-shirt and a pair of mid-thigh length bike shorts, and Instagram star Lil Miquela, wearing a tracksuit and tank top, share a kiss was decidedly reserved. However, the 36-second ad still sparked controversy. Critics accused the ad of queerbating, calling it a "performative" display of lesbianism. Instead of hiring real queer women for their campaign, the Calvin Klein brand hired a straight woman and a fictional character (Petrarca, 2019). Part of the controversy here was that Lil Miquela does not exist—at least not in the physical world. She is a CGI character owned and operated by the LA-based tech firm Brud and belongs to a new class of online celebrities known as *virtual influencers*.

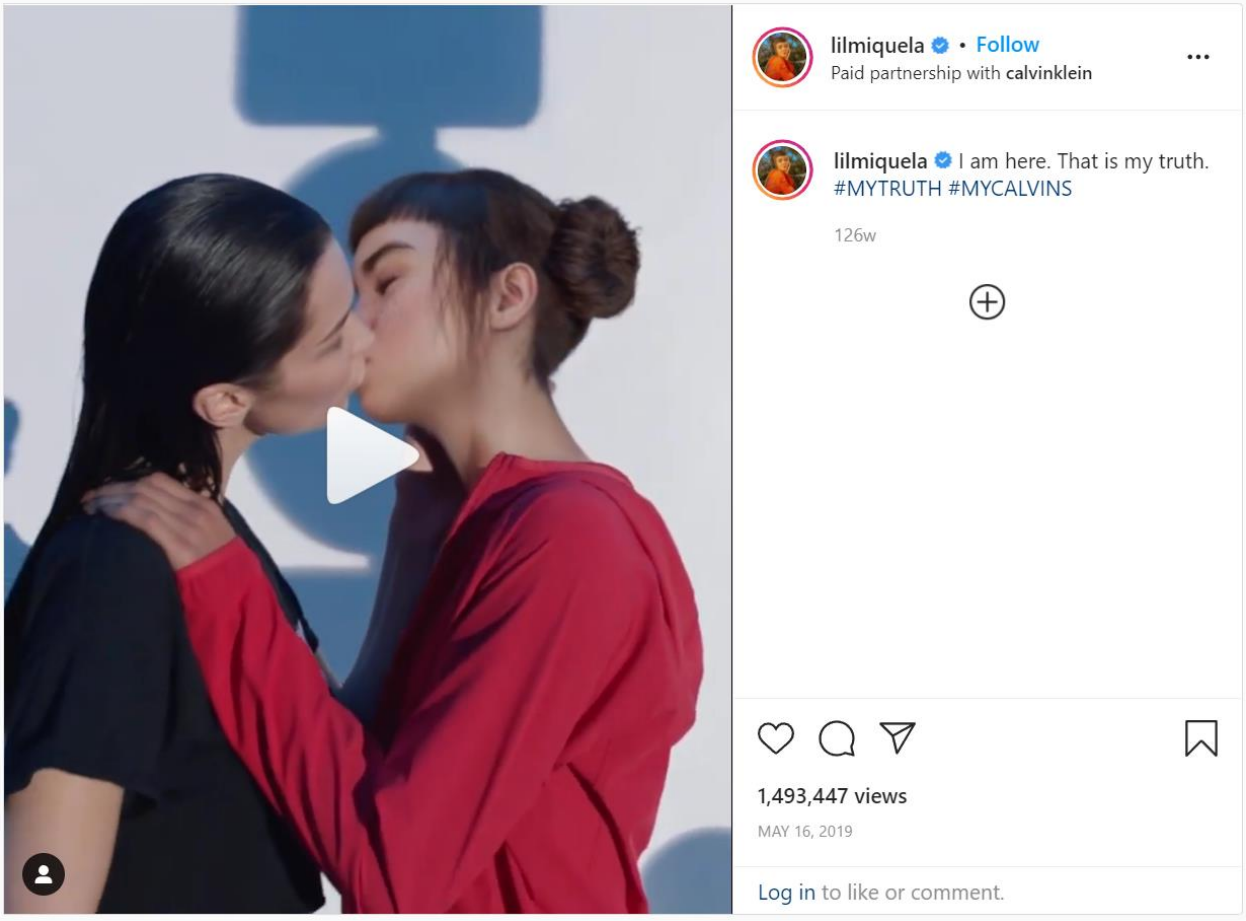
Influencers: Human and Virtual

Influencers belong to a category of internet personalities called micro-celebrities. Micro-celebrities are not so-called because of their small-scale audiences, but more because of their micro-level interactions with followers. Micro-celebrity describes the *performance* of celebrity more than the achievement of it.

> Micro-celebrity is best understood as a new style of online performance that involves people 'amping up' their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites. Micro-celebrity sometimes looks like conventional celebrity, but the two aren't the same. (Senft, 2008, p. 25)

Figure 1

#MyCalvins Ad



Note. Miquela Kisses Bella Hadid for Calvin Klein, Instagram Screenshot.

Micro-celebrities self-present in ways designed to build their online popularity. This includes the creation of a highly curated online self, self-disclosure of private and intimate life details, and direct interaction with social media followers via comment sections, direct messages, polls and other tools offered by social media platforms (Abidin, 2015; Marwick, 2016).

What it means to be a micro-celebrity has evolved drastically since Theresa Senft (2008) coined the term at the end of the Aughts. Previously, online celebrities were mostly niche figures with small followings in comparison to the stars of Hollywood and pop music. Micro-celebrities

were limited in how they could monetise their online popularity or crossover into mainstream media. They lived on personal blogs and home-camming sites, needed access to expensive and often finicky networking equipment and computer hardware, and users had to be in the know just to find these online celebs in the first place. This began to change during the early 2010s as internet users migrated to mobile devices and social networks like Twitter and Instagram which boosted the visibility of their most popular users. Users no longer had to manage long bookmark lists to find their favourite micro-celebrities online, they need only to login to Instagram where much of the content they wanted to see came neatly packaged together in a single vertical scrolling feed and where they could easily discover new online personalities to follow and interact with. During this period some micro-celebrities began acting as paid spokespeople for brands looking to target their products to young web-savvy consumers. This shift allowed micro-celebrities to "monetise their following" through branded partnerships, endorsement deals, and sometimes by selling their own products directly to their followers. This evolution from niche figure to online product spokesperson created the social media influencer as understood by the contemporary advertising industry and social media users (Abidin, 2015).

Other hallmarks of micro-celebrity include the presentation of an "ordinary and everyday" persona (Abidin, 2015). This performance of ordinariness makes micro-celebrities feel more relatable to followers than conventional celebrities, thus easier to engage and develop long-term relationships with. In part, micro-celebrities' presentation of ordinariness was a response to new market demands that had made the ordinary-celebrity a hot media commodity. The rise of reality TV through the late-90s and early-2000s saw many supposedly ordinary people elevated to celebrity status with each new season of *Survivor* and *Big Brother* (Turner, 2006). Graeme Turner dubbed the shift towards "ordinary" people as celebrities, created through

"celebrity culture, reality TV, DIY websites, talk radio and the like" the demotic turn (p. 153). The demotic turn created the dual phenomenon of making celebrities seem more relatable to audiences, and the achievement of celebrity by ordinary people to be easier as well. Micro-celebrities pushed the demotic turn to its logical extreme, making celebrities of themselves by simply acting as if they were already famous while maintaining a veneer of ordinary relatability. Simultaneously, micro-celebrities could maintain fame across time in ways that reality stars could not. Once reality stars achieve celebrity, their use value as products diminished in the eyes of the industry that spawned them. Reality TV creates fame but does not maintain it, and as such it relies on a never-ending churn of new ordinary people to make celebrities of season after season (p. 155). Without the continued support of the mainstream media, many reality stars quickly fell into obscurity (Giles, 2018, p. 64). By controlling their own media presence and publication schedules to a much higher degree, micro-celebrities can hold follower attention for longer periods of time, allowing for deeper relationships and continued growth in popularity and cultural importance.

Micro-celebrities are not entirely decoupled from the media industries, however. The social media platforms they exist on exercise a massive amount of control over their reach and popularity through constantly changing and nearly unpredictable recommendation algorithms (Jarrett, 2022, p. 54). This means that micro-celebrity content is highly tailored to work within the context of their chosen platform, and creating content that plays across platforms is challenging. Micro-celebrities who make their name on platforms like Twitter may find it difficult to pivot to other platforms where the style of content they are known for may not play as well. While the power imbalance remains in the favour of social media platforms, the platforms recognize that micro-celebrities are one of the key draws to their apps. As such, several of the

biggest social media platforms cultivate the development of micro-celebrities via programs like YouTube's advertising revenue split with vloggers and TikTok's Creator Fund which help micro-celebrities make posting on these platforms their full-time job.

The shift from micro-celebrities as relatively niche online figures to central pieces of the social media industry suggests we may need to find new ways to describe this category of online celebrity. David Giles (2018) suggests the term micro-celebrity no longer accurately describes the phenomenon in question, arguing that the "constraints of online fame" that prevented online personalities from reaching mainstream fame no longer exist and many online personalities now have much wider relevancy than their mainstream counterparts (p. 74). Further, Giles states that neither the entertainment industry nor audiences see mainstream celebrity as a superior form of celebrity anymore, placing online and mainstream celebrity on a similar "hierarchical" plane of cultural relevancy (p. 75). While Marwick and others have stressed that micro-celebrity describes a set of self-presentation practices rather than audience reach (i.e., performing celebrity on a micro-scale without the aid of large-scale fame-producing institutions like Hollywood) we can challenge this construction, too. Online content creation has become increasingly institutionalized over the years. Influencers now have agency representations, marketing managers and full-time production teams. Many of the resources that were previously unavailable to the online creators of a decade ago are now accessible to most if not all individuals who make a living creating content online. In many ways, the cultural relevancy of social media and micro-celebrities has become so entrenched that even the biggest mainstream actors and singers must maintain a meaningful social media presence to keep their careers on track.

Some thinkers have made attempts to categorize the not-quite-niche-not-quite-mainstream position many internet celebrities occupy. Notable is Marco Pedroni's (2016) classification of the meso-influencer. For Pedroni, this is someone whoes primary "professional activity" is the creation of their online content and who interfaces with the "institutional actors" of their given industry (p. 108). Meso-celebrities may hold "local or national" fame but do not have the international notoriety required for full celebrity (p. 105). David Giles (2018) suggests thinking about celebrity as a spectrum with "celebrity itself on the extreme pole" is useful for understanding the differing levels of fame an individual may occupy. However, he argues this boils down the differences in status to sheer reach and follower counts, disregarding contextual differences such as the celebrity's industry of origin, primary cultural sphere, or personal identity (p. 161). Crystal Abidin (2018) attempts to address the context problem by introducing the category of internet celebrities. For her, these are the professionalized class of online creators with "high visibility" and the potential to crossover from internet platforms to other media forms (p. 16).

From "micro-celebrity" to Influencers

While the problem of what exactly to call these online stars or how to categorize them remains unsolved, I still had to make a choice about how to refer to them throughout my thesis. While my work builds on the literature surrounding micro-celebrities, I do not use the term "micro-celebrity" frequently in my writing. Instead, I most often use the terms influencer or creator—largely interchangeably—though there are some minor connotative differences between these two terms. Creator has emerged as the most common term used to describe micro-celebrities by typical social media users. Creator is an umbrella term for anyone who makes money through the creation of online content, or, at the very least, has desires of earning an

income from their content (Cunningham & Craig, 2021, p. 1). Their content may live on any number of online platforms and can utilise diverse content mediums and genres. The term is less connected to the kinds of self-presentation practices that Senft, Marwick and Abidin describe, instead focusing on the product the creator in question makes: the YouTube video, Instagram post, pornography, digital artwork, etc. Much of the labour required for success (interacting with the audience, self-disclosure and so on) indicative of micro-celebrity remains important and practiced aspects of gaining success as an online creator. Influencer, on the other hand, is the term favoured by the advertising industry. Marketers hire influencers as part of advertising campaigns to capture the attention of their target demographics. For the average social media user, the term influencer has taken on a somewhat negative connotation. Some social media users see influencers as new-era snake oil sellers, promoting goods of dubious quality with less-than-factual claims about their efficacy or value. Part of the objective of the turn towards the term creator has been one of rehabilitation, whereby online personalities have tried to distance their selves from their less scrupulous counterparts. Neither of these terms satisfyingly remedy the emergent issues with micro-celebrity as a descriptor of a particular kind of online fame, but maybe they do not have to. Generally, people understand what an online or digital creator is and the kinds of self-presentation practices they engage in. In academia, edited collections like Stuart Cunningham and David Craig's *Creator Culture* (2021) use the term creator to describe this class of online personalities, and Crystal Abidin (2015) has long used the term influencer as shorthand for the term micro-celebrity.

The myth of self-made entrepreneurial success so central to our late-capitalist reality now fully subsumes influencers and other internet creators. The story goes that anyone with the right work ethic and the ability to make alluring content can obtain fame and riches online. *You can*

become famous for being you. Yet, as so often happens in the hustle-culture hellscape we live in, the 'promises' of gross monetary rewards serves to obscure the labour and exploitation associated with the influencer industry and only those with a big enough following (and the ability to mobilise them) will reap financial rewards.

As online channels become increasingly important to marketers, so too have influencers. Marketing spend on influencers continues to grow, and many of the top influencers exert massive power over their sizable and sometimes multi-national audiences (Cornwell & Katz, 2020, p. 21). S. Venus Jin et al. (2019) found that consumers believe social media influencers to be more trustworthy product endorsers than conventional celebrities and influencers generate greater positive sentiments towards the products they endorse. Marketers seek to strengthen influencers' trustworthiness by selecting the right influencers to promote their products. Follower count is important here, but brands also need to make sure they partner with influencers who align with their values and whoes followers are most likely to click the 'buy' button (De Veirman et al., 2017).

While influencer marketing has many advantages over traditional celebrity endorsement advertising, it is not without its challenges. Control is a key area of concern, as marketers are generally fearful of becoming associated with inflammatory claims made by influencers they work with (Bishop, 2021). Still, marketers must be careful not to exert too much control over the messaging, as holding on too tightly prevents the influencer's unique voice from coming through reducing the high levels of consumer trust influencers otherwise enjoy (Martínez-López et al., 2020). One way marketers are trying to get around these problems is through the use of virtual influencers.

From the Digital to the Virtual

Virtual influencers are a little more difficult to define than human influencers. They are CGI avatars used as substitutes for flesh-and-blood human influencers. The easiest comparison to reach for is the brand mascot, a Toucan Sam, or a Marlboro Man. Some virtual influencers work in this exact way. Mattel's famous Barbie character has taken on a new life as a virtual influencer in recent years, with the @barbie Instagram account featuring typical product announcement posts and promotional content alongside short videos of a computer-animated Barbie playing the role of a lifestyle influencer. Other virtual influencers are far more flexible, however, and not tied to specific brands. The next instinct is to look towards licensed characters, Hello Kitty and Mickey Mouse, for instance. Characters like these can appear in any number of advertising campaigns or emblazoned on products from luxury watches to pre-packed foods. The best licensed characters have an almost Benjaminian aura: loved and revered by fans, and very capable of moving product (Vlessing, 2019). In these instances, the character's depiction on the product increases its appeal to the target audience. People buy the Hello Kitty t-shirt not because Kitty herself wore the piece, but because she appears on it. There are virtual influencers that play in this space as well. Guiggimon (@guggimon on Instagram), the edgy anthropomorphic rabbit, who peddles vinyl toys, digital artworks and apparel featuring the character for owners Superplastic is one example (Hatmaker, 2021).

The virtual influencer at the centre of my thesis, Lil Miquela (Fig. 2), represents a third type of virtual influencer, one which maps more closely to human lifestyle influencers than the previously discussed fictional marketing characters. Lifestyle influencers are a sub-category of influencers focused on selling followers an aspirational lifestyle and the wide slate of products that comes with that as opposed to a specific product or category of products. There is, of course, an aspect of aspirationalism in all forms of product endorsement and influencer content. Tech

influencers promote the latest and best gadgets, travel influencers make trips to exotic, far-flung locales, and fashion influencers wear the most desirable of designer garments. For most consumers, the products are all well out of reach and represent some form of aspirational consumerism which to lust after. Lifestyle influencers bring many of these categories together to create the image of a wholistically aspirational lifestyle. Lifestyle influencers fly first-class to exotic places while wearing designer and documenting the whole thing on Apple's latest iPhone. They spend time with chic friends in cool places, but eat just enough fast food and go on just enough bad Tinder dates to remain relatable. They represent the lifestyle you wish you had and if you buy the products they use, or go to the restaurants they frequent you might get a little closer to owning that dream.

Figure 2

Typical Miquela Post

Note. A recent post from Miquela's Instagram, representative of her lifestyle influencer content, Instagram screenshot.

Lil Miquela's content follows this formula, presenting the trappings of an idealized teenage life to her followers. Canonically, Miquela is a never-aging Brazilian-American bi-sexual 19-year-old robot girl who attends buzzworthy events, connects with other Instagram influencers, and creates her own music and visual art all while wearing trending styles and brands.

It is paramount to understand that virtual influencers are *not* AI or robots (Alexander, 2019). They are not autonomous machines. They are characters carefully scripted by shrewd marketers, designed for the purpose of selling products. Mistaking Miquela for a piece of software which acts independently obscures the team of real human marketers that lie behind her and their explicit interests in capitalistic pursuits. In the interest of brevity, I at times refer to Miquela in a way that may seem like I am ascribing her autonomy when, of course, she has none and the team who manages her is responsible for the conception and execution of 'her actions.'

Coming from a background in English literature, this is no different than how I would discuss any other fictional character. When I say Max Rockatansky refused to kill Blaster after defeating him in combat because of his personal convictions, I am not suggesting the titular character of George Miller's *Mad Max* franchise is a real person who chose to rise above the winner-takes-all rules of the world he inhabits. The 'actions' of Max are, of course, entirely fictional, imaged by the film's writers, and depicted on screen by actors playing pretend in front of movie cameras. We as audiences are aware of the fictitious nature of cinema, nevertheless, we discuss the characters as if they are people with agency. I have chosen here to treat Miquela in the same way.

This choice to discuss Miquela in the same way I would any other fictional character comes with complications. Miquela's fiction differs from that of blockbuster cinema, of course, as she blurs the line between reality and fiction to a much higher degree. When moviegoers enter a theatre, they expect to see a fictional story play out. These expectations are the same for consumers of any number of fictional media texts but is not entirely the case for social media users. Social media is a place where 'real people' discuss their lives. Placing Miquela within that context increases her ability to appear as if real to her followers. A first-person style of posting and occasional responses to followers further boosts her perceived realness. However, social media users are also aware of the ways others use platforms like Instagram to present their selves in ways that are not entirely truthful (Lavrence & Cambre, 2020). Further, virtual influencers are not the only social media accounts that represent non-human and non-autonomous things. Animal, brand, and meme accounts all exist within the milieu of users' feeds and often take on a first-person style of communication that users do not read as representative of the depicted individual. These are not perfect comparisons, and Miquela differs from brand accounts in key

ways that make her easier for audiences to connect with. As I argue in Chapter Four, making users think she *is real* is not necessarily the goal for Miquela's creators, nor is it necessary for them to succeed in creating a profitable product spokesperson. Speaking of Miquela this way does risk further obscuring the team of individuals who operate her, and this is a potential issue that I am aware of. However, given the amount of space in this thesis dedicated to discussing that team, and illuminating Miquela's unrealness, I hope the previous explanation of why I sometimes refer to Miquela as an individual is enough to stave off any reader confusion. The next section of this chapter explains both the market significance of Lil Miquela and why I chose to research her and her creators.

Influencers on (Virtual) Influencers: Inspiration for this Project

A report from *OnBuy* estimated Lil Miquela made as much as USD$17.3 million in 2022 for Brud, the company that created and manages her (Steele, 2022). At the time of writing, Miquela has 2.8 million Instagram followers, has acted as a brand ambassador for Samsung's Galaxy line of smartphones, sold her own NFTs, produced music, and made out with supermodel Bella Hadid in the aforementioned Calvin Klein ad (Miquela, 2019; Moran, 2021; Stutz, 2017; Petrarca, 2019). Alongside Miquela's appearances in high-profile marketing campaigns Instagram users have begun to normalize the presence of virtual influencers in their social feeds. In 2019, data published by market research firm Mindshare showed 32 percent of individuals aged 18 to 34 in the UK "follow profiles on Instagram or Twitter that they know aren't real" (p. 92). Mindshare uses this data to suggest the "nakedly transparent" marketing nature of virtual influencers could make them more appealing to audiences than traditional influencers (p. 87). Mindshare goes so far as to suggest the use of virtual influencers might ease the increasingly evident negative mental health effects of platforms like Instagram:

> Whereas a constant stream of tweaked images from friends showcasing the best bits of their lives might leave people feeling a bit inadequate, a virtual influencer's life is pure fantasy and followers know where they stand. On this basis, it's little surprise that a third of 18–34s say 'I follow profiles on Instagram or Twitter that I know aren't real.' (Mindshare, 2019, p. 82)

Answering questions about whether virtual influencers will actually reduce the negative health effects of social media has proven to be difficult. When I chose to research this topic, I had planned to explore the relationships between virtual influencers and their fans, examining what draws them to characters like Miquela and why they have continued to follow her across time. After applying for and receiving ethics approval for an interview-based study I attempted to recruit Instagram users to participate in a short survey/interview. From 5 January 2023 to 1 February 2023 I approached dozens of users who had commented on Miquela's recent posts to ask if they would talk to me about their relationship with her. This recruitment method proved to be unsuccessful. I quickly found that most of the commenters I approached would not acknowledge my initial message. Most who did reply disengaged after realizing the high level of involvement required of them to participate in an academic research project. Asking users to follow a link to the informed consent form and book a Zoom call with a strange man likely seemed suspicious. By the end of it I had messaged 65 users and only booked three interviews (about 4.5 percent of users contacted). This makes my results inferior to previous studies of a similar nature. Abhinav Choudhry et al. (2022) recruited 32 of the 350 virtual influencer followers contacted for an interview study via Instagram direct messages (p. 43:9). This means they successfully interviewed just over nine percent of the users they contacted, doubling my results. However, the effectiveness of Instagram direct messages as a recruitment method for

interview studies remains unclear overall. Recent literature reviews on study recruitment via social media platforms have only focused on recruitment for survey-based research (Darko et al., 2022; Zindel, 2022). While these studies found social media to be an effective means of recruitment for surveys, surveys have a clear and notably lower barrier to entry for participants than interviews. The most successful social media recruitment campaigns included the use of paid strategies (use of targeted ads on social media platforms), something that was out of reach for my project (Zindel, 2022, p. 18). The only way for me to scale up outreach for my study would have been to put more time in, identifying more users who commented and sending out more messages. This was not something easily done, as I was already coming up against Instagram's spam prevention tools which limit users from messaging too many other users in a short period of time. Furthering my issues with scaling was a general suspicion of strangers among social media users. Given the high levels of sexual harassment experienced by young women online (Vitak et al., 2017; Vitis & Gilmour, 2017) and the prevalence of social media scams (Federal Trade Commission, 2022) that suspicion is not surprising nor unfounded.

Additionally, snowball methods seemed to be of little good to me in this project. Of the few interviews I had managed to complete, none of the participants had friends or acquaintances they could direct me to. Virtual influencer fandom seemed to have a limited wider community, people enjoyed virtual influencers personally, not collectively. While I am still interested in interviewing people about what draws them to comment on a virtual influencer's Instagram posts, my experiences necessitated a shift and reframing to complete this thesis in a timely manner.

When brainstorming how I would move forward with my thesis I thought back to how I had discovered Lil Miquela: a 2019 YouTube video by tech commentator Lewis Hilsenteger. In

the video Hilsenteger expressed his concerns about tighter corporate control over influencer marketing:

> To those that are unaware, the uninitiated, there is such a thing as a virtual influencer. An actual boardroom of human adults creating a fabricated, a [computer generated], influencer that then goes on to Instagram, Twitter, wherever else; wears outfits, does influencer posts, does sponsored posts. You see what I'm saying? It's hard enough with the humans exploiting themselves. The last thing this space needed was more of a corporate mindset. (LaterClips, 2019)

Hilsenteger's immediate concerns about power and ownership stuck with me. If human influencers are already such an exploitable class of workers, we should assume the transition to corporately owned spokespeople comes with at least the same (if not greater) levels of labour exploitation. To my knowledge, this clip from a YouTuber, himself best known for reviewing and promoting consumer products, remains one of the few texts interrogating the exploitation of workers in the virtual influencer industry. I hope to add to that conversation here.

Virtual influencers, I argue, represent a labour shift for the influencer industry away from entrepreneurial individuals towards an obscured corporate structure. Where the labour of human influencers is to some extent visible to their followers, virtual influencers serve to obscure the labour of influencer work as much as possible. While we may not see the work involved with content creation or managing brand deals, social media users expect the person in the photo to be doing the work. Influencers are in many ways a highly distilled version of the entrepreneurial myth, where an individualized person can rise to fame and fortunes via their own work ethic, charms, and singular vision. With virtual influencers that work shifts to a team of creatives and marketers working behind the scenes to replicate the look and feel of the most popular and brand

safe influencers on platforms like Instagram while simultaneously invisiblizing and enabling the exploitation of the people who create them. It is this shift in labour I will explore in my thesis, guided by three interrelated research questions:

> RQ1: How does the advertising industry benefit from the shift from human influencers to virtual ones and the veiling of labour from users' view?
> RQ2: How do virtual influencer creators use existing genre and social media conventions to create successful replacements for human influencers?
> RQ3: Who are the new workers under this labour shift, and what forms of labour exploitation apply to them?

Methods for Researching Virtual Humans

I have turned to textual analysis methods to answer these questions. Political economy frequently takes texts as the subject of analysis, be that works analysing the history of an industry (Shtern & Hill, 2021, p. 250), documents from institutional archives, or government regulations (Hansen & Machin, 2018, p. 35). Interviews and other methods of directly accessing the people in the focus industry are important means of research, but history, policy and the texts developed for, by, and about an industry can tell us much about our chosen areas of study. Most of my thesis uses this method—the analysing, contextualizing, and critiquing of texts describing the history, regulation, self-positioning, and management of the industries explored throughout.

Chapter Four is the one exception to this methodological choice. While political economic theory and motivations continue to guide the direction of this chapter, the focus shifts from the labour and business of creating virtual influencers towards virtual influencers as media texts. If virtual influencers are to be viable replacements for human influencers they must first read as such to social media users. Here I turn to my background in English studies and literary criticism to argue that virtual influencer content replicates enough of the genre conventions and tropes of human influencer content for the two to be analogous enough for users to accept one as a substitute for the other.

This variation of methods, and my intentions to create a propulsive narrative across my thesis means each chapter builds upon the last, advancing systematically towards its stated goals. However, each chapter contains insights and conclusions that can stand on their own, and the next section offers a brief introduction to each chapter and its focus. This overview should be helpful for those who would like a snapshot of the whole work or who are interested in specific questions and want a better idea of where to look for them.

Thesis Overview

My thesis focuses on the labour conditions of virtual influencer creators. I argue that virtual influencers are a labour replacing technology allowing brands and marketers to substitute a highly visible and increasingly powerful workforce of human influencers for an invisiblized and exploitable workforce of virtual influencer creators. I examine the reasons why brands are replacing human influencers—a deeply important and effective online marketing tool—with cheaper and easier to control virtual influencers. From here, I argue that virtual influencers work 'well enough' as replacements for human influencers that they allow the aforementioned workforce transition to be successful. Ultimately, my findings indicate that the use of virtual influencers is sleight of hand on the part of marketers and brands, subtly veiling workers from consumers' view, which in turn keeps labour a cheap and replaceable commodity.

In this opening chapter I introduced Miquela as a character and the phenomenon of virtual influencers more broadly. I briefly discussed what influencers are, how they interface with the advertising industry, and how an industry shift towards virtual influencers represents a reduction of visibility for social media workers.

Chapter Two serves as the literature review for my thesis. As a new area of research, the published material remains thin. As such, I have also included a literature review of influencer

studies more broadly and other associated areas of research. These texts help ground my work and offers a jumping-off point for the rest of my exploration.

Chapter Three begins the analytical portion of the thesis and explores the current regulatory framework of the influencer and virtual influencer industries. I do this in service of trying to answer my first research question: how does the advertising industry benefit from the shift from human influencers to virtual ones and the veiling of labour from users' view? The chapter argues that influencer marketing has become increasingly risky for advertisers. Stricter disclosure policies mean influencers need to clearly state anytime they receive payment for promoting a product or risk having their reach limited. Further, creators making incendiary comments risk having their social media accounts banned, leaving brands to clean up the messes left by their problematic partners. Meanwhile, regulation has yet to come to the virtual influencer sector in any meaningful way, making deceptive marketing tactics easier to get away with. Further, as non-autonomous fictional characters virtual influencers have a reduced risk of getting involved in a controversy that has not been intentionally orchestrated. All told, virtual influencers remove many of the perceived problems that brands encounter when working with a group of independent and occasionally unpredictable workers who may not reliably act in the best interests of advertisers.

Chapter Four explores whether virtual influencers can successfully replace their human counterparts. Influencers are among the most successful product spokespeople in history. Other product endorser categories do not see the high levels of trust followers have in influencers, and the most popular influencers command a following far larger than some of the brands they work with. To be a viable labour replacing technology, virtual influencers must be able to foster the deeply intimate relationships with their followers that human influencers enjoy. It is a goal

virtual influencers seem poised to achieve. As intimate influencer content has become a genre, it has also become replicable. Skilled writers can now mimic the kinds of social media content that best facilitates feelings of intimacy between influencers and followers and publish it under virtual influencer accounts like Miquela's. When coupled with a history of digital avatars as stand-ins for human videogame players, well-crafted characters like Miquela become strikingly easy for social media users to connect with. This leads me to the question of who makes Miquela.

Chapter Five closes out the analysis portion of the thesis by speculating on who does the labour of creating and maintaining virtual influencers. The secretive nature of companies like Brud means there is little access to primary data on this topic. This has left me to infer on virtual influencer labour by reviewing the literature on associated industries. Primarily, I examined works on the labour conditions of animators, games designers, and community managers. Given my assumption that virtual influencer development lands somewhere between these three industries, I make the case that the labour conditions for virtual influencer workers does too and the kinds of worker exploitations seen in these jobs will extend to virtual influencer workers.

Chapter Six is the concluding chapter of my thesis. There I discuss the throughlines of the previous three chapters and offer some final thoughts.

Theoretical Foundations

To address the questions outlined above, I employ a multi-theoretical framework. I choose the theories used throughout based on both their ability to help answer the specific questions of the individual chapters, and for their collective cohesion. These theories bolster and support one another, but do not lose their own individuality or identity, each contributing to the whole of the work while still maintaining their integrity in their isolated applications.

Each of the three analysis chapters of my thesis takes on its own primary theoretical foundation: political economy in Chapter Two, emotional capitalism in Chapter Three, and affect theory in Chapter Four. While each chapter has its own primary theoretical leanings, traces of the other two theoretical traditions appear in all sections of this work, with political economy acting as an underlying and unifying force across my thesis.

Political economy analyses have a long history in communications research, emerging in the 1940s (McChesney, 2008, p. 13). As state sponsored propaganda machines spun up throughout the war years and across many nations, media researchers were increasingly concerned with the relationships between wealth and power and how the wealthy and powerful influenced "cultural and social life" (Mosco, 2009, p. 4). In particular, this meant "studying communication and media as commodities produced by capitalist industries" (Wasko, 2014, p. 2) and how the producers of these media products exercised power over society (Mosco, p. 2).

While Janet Wasko cited a growth in political economy of media research in 2014, nearly ten years on, that growth seems to have stagnated. TMU's Communications and Culture program director admitted to a class I attended during my first year of studies as an MA student in the joint program between my institution of York University and his own that their side of the program had not accepted any students with a political economy focus for 2021 enrolments. The lack of institutional interest in political economy seems poised to change, however. The antitrust suits facing American tech giants Apple, Amazon, Meta, and Google—each of them massively powerful media companies in their own right—signals the political will to clamp down on the swollen powers of these corporations (Morrison, 2021). Further, growing wealth inequality spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic, greedflation (inflation not as a product of market scarcity and the rising cost of production, but by corporate actors eager to pad their profit

margins) and job insecurity is pushing an ever-increasing critical analysis of corporate power worldwide. Political economy, with its focus on understanding and undermining the power a small handful of elites leverage over the masses, provides the tools and lenses necessary to critically evaluate the deeply inequitable condition of social life under an advanced and poorly regulated capitalist system. Here, that means using political economy frameworks to uncover the ways virtual influencer owners exploit the behind the scenes workers that bring them to life. When you follow the money most of it ends up in the same few sets of hands.

Affect theory moves us away from the public domain of work and politics towards the private realm of feelings. Affect theory, as defined by Brian Massumi (2002) and others, understands affects as the non-conscious reactions of bodies when they encounter one another. Here, we define bodies in the widest possible sense, where interactions and encounters with things living, dead, never-lived and otherwise increase or reduce the affected's ability to act. In this way, affect is a transitive force pushing us, as Deleuze would say, from one state of existence to another, or in more Massumian terms, from one emotional state to another, the affect dissipating once the transition is complete. Intensity describes the strength or duration of an affect, and it is only after we "narrativize" or take a "conscious positioning" to this intensity that affect becomes action and emotion (Massumi, p. 25).

In Chapter Four I argue for an understanding of virtual influencers as affective bodies. It is their affective qualities that make human influencers reliable product spokespeople to begin with. Virtual influencers can only become viable labour replacements if their creators can imbue them with those same affective qualities, and I explore how they achieve this goal.

Eva Illouz's (2007) emotional capitalism acts as my bridge between the seemingly irreconcilable public realm of economies and the private world of emotions. As Illouz tells us

modernity entangles the public and private spheres. Businesses have come to see the maintenance of specific emotional states among their employees as key to high worker productivity. Emotional capitalism expects workers to manage their own emotions and deal with the emotions of others in ways that benefit their employers. While businesses may cultivate a workplace culture of open discussion of workers' emotions, management is unlikely to act or make changes to the business structure based on employees' emotions. Instead, managers equate the discussion of emotions with the resolution of said emotions, failing to meaningfully engage with the cause of those emotions.

In Chapter Five I argue emotional capitalism has reached its logical conclusion in recent years. Employees must now manage their emotions in the face of growing job insecurity and economic disparity if they want to maintain employment while simultaneously engaging with the emotions of the consumers they service. The structure of emotional capitalism leaves those working behind the scenes at virtual influencer companies and other similar workers in a position where they cannot meaningfully improve the company's relationship with workers or consumers.

Chapter 2

Robo-Review: A Literature Review for Virtual Influencer Studies

The digital model and influencer Lil Miquela may not be 'real,' but she is not divorced from reality either. Instead, she exists in a larger sociotechnical structure and the continually evolving definition of who—and what—can achieve fame. Miquela is part of an emerging category of online celebrity called virtual influencers. Virtual influencers build on several converging cultural phenomena; they are as much indebted to real world celebrity generating practices as they are to the clever scripting of beloved fictional characters. Virtual influencers represent the blending of women's entertainment, online self-presentation practices and influencer marketing. Positioning Miquela within this context and history provides a lens through which to understand how social media users interact with virtual influencers and what the cultural impact of virtual influencers is outside of their express purpose as marketing tools. That is, virtual influencers exist at the intersection of social media influencers and affective fictional characters. This literature review situates Miquela within that history.

Research exploring virtual influencers' effects on labour remains limited. To date, most work on virtual influencers focuses on their use as marketing tools. As such, to understand the full cultural context of Miquela and competing virtual influencers, I have expanded this review beyond literature explicitly about virtual influencers to include works on celebrity, digital labour, and online presentation practices. These inclusions help place Miquela within the broader contemporary social media context she operates within. The literature on social media influencers more broadly is key here. As a replacement for human influencers, virtual influencers are deeply informed by the history and cultural contexts of social media influencers. Moving on, I turn my attention briefly to audience studies literature—specifically the construction of audiences for women's entertainment—to understand how Miquela's creators borrow from these

conventions to help them construct an accessible and attractive narrative. Finally, I look at a set of social media and video game practices which Miquela's managers use to present her as a relatable 'person' online.

Influencer Studies

'Influencer' has come to mean a lot of things. At their most essential they are digital content creators with a "large network of followers and are regarded as trusted tastemakers" who use their networks and trustworthiness to recommend products to their followers (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 2). The advertising industry sees influencers as valuable partners and marketing spend on influencer campaigns has seen steady growth over the last decade (Cornwell & Katz, 2020, p. 21). Over time, however, users began to associate the term 'influencer' with a group of people using deceptive marketing techniques to peddle low-quality products. This perception has pushed many influencers to embrace the title of 'creator' instead, shifting the focus of what they do from marketing goods to creating online content. This change of terms has not disentangled influencers from the advertising industry, as most still monetize their content through advertorial content and in-content ad reads (Abidin, 2015). Academic literature may refer to influencers as 'micro-celebrities,' a title which describes a set of self-presentation and promotional tactics designed to boost one's online popularity including: the curation of an "easily consumable persona, responding directly to readers, and sharing personal information to enhance emotional ties with fans" (Marwick, 2016, p. 341).

Influencers distinguish themselves from other categories of product spokespeople by nurturing deep and intimate relationships with their followers. Terri Senft (2008) was one of the earliest writers to identify this, using the term micro-celebrity to describe both the emerging category of online celebrities and the practices they use to achieve their popularity. Micro-

celebrity practices include direct interactions with followers online and the disclosure of personal details of the practitioner's life. These practices allow followers to feel as if they have a deep and intimate relationship with their favourite internet personalities. A few years later, Alice Marwick and dana boyd (2011) would show that these practices have become the base requirement for fame online, as mainstream film and music stars found they could not build their online followings without using micro-celebrity practices.

By the mid-2010s internet users had largely made the shift from text-based modes of online communication (blogging, Twitter) to more visual forms of expression. Meta (formerly Facebook) purchased the young mobile-first photo-sharing social network Instagram in 2012, accelerating the popularity growth of the platform (Luckerson, 2016). The same year Google gained full control over YouTube on the iPhone, greatly improving the app's user experience on Apple's massively popular smartphone platform, kicking off the video-on-mobile era in earnest (Bonnington, 2012). These shifts pushed thinkers like Alice Marwick (2015) to explore how micro-celebrity practices were adapting to the growing popularity of highly visual social media. While micro-celebrities continued the practices of self-disclosure and addressing their followers in a conversational tone on Instagram, user interactions became deprioritised, and less useful for micro-celebrities. Instead, micro-celebrities begin to use visual cues associated with mainstream celebrity (photos with other famous people, displays of wealth, adherence to exceptional beauty standards, etc.). These practices help micro-celebrities on Instagram seem like aspirational figures even if their relative fame or status does not match up with how they portray their selves. At the same time, Crystal Abidin (2015) was exploring the ways micro-celebrities use their popularity on Instagram for financial gain. By creating a sense of intimacy with their followers, social media users developed high levels of trust with micro-celebrities and influencers.

Influencer shopping recommendations now carry significant weight for their followers, making influencers excellent product endorsers. Marwick (2016) followed up on her own and Abidin's insights with a discussion of micro-celebrity practices on YouTube. Here, Marwick lays out one of the strongest definitions of micro-celebrity (referenced above), bridging the gap between the attention seeking practices Senft describes and the more economically motivated goals of Abidin's influencers. The definition of micro-celebrity used throughout my thesis maps most closely to Marwick's, and I argue it is her framework for internet celebrity that Miquela's managers built her from.

Contemporary micro-celebrities are not the only influence for Miquela though. Online fame extends beyond influencers and micro-celebrities, existing in many places and forms (Abidin, 2018). Creators can derive internet fame from the exclusive lifestyles they depict, their exotic appeal, or their technical skills, regardless of their ability to create intimate relationships with their followers (p. 36). While the development of intimate relationships with followers may not be a requirement for fame, it remains important for influencers that want to be successful product spokespeople while keeping followers engaged in the long-term (p. 71).

What constitutes fame (and *who* can be famous) is not static and evolves over time. David Giles (2018) discusses the changing nature of fame at length, especially as online fame has continued to differentiate itself from fame generated by institutions like the Hollywood star system. Key to the discussion here is the rise of Reality TV throughout the 2000s. The popularity of shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother* pushed two major changes in the cultural understanding of celebrity. First, Reality TV became a platform for the elevation of regular people to celebrity status. While not everyone featured on these programs became a bona fide celebrity, the possibility was always there. Participants with the right disposition, skills, and relationships

could capitalize on their broadcast TV debuts, reaping financial rewards and extending their celebrity well past their time on the show (p. 64). In some ways, this helped set the stage for the self-making of celebrity via social media, as Reality TV proved ordinary people can become celebrities with the right kind and amount of media exposure.

Second, Reality TV presented existing mainstream celebrities as average people. Programs like *Dancing with the Stars* placed celebrities outside of their usual contexts of glamourous events, press tours and career related appearances, instead having them mingle with everyday people and participate in activities not associated with their given profession (Giles, 2018, p. 69). This established an audience desire to see the backstage of celebrity life, and presaged the advent of micro-celebrity social media content predicated on self-disclosure and a manufactured behind the scenes look at the subject's life. Running parallel to reality TV's rise was the growing popularity of homecammers. Homecammers, ordinary individuals who posted photos of their day-to-day lives online, were some of the earliest practitioners of micro-celebrity practices, proving that internet personalities could become minor celebrities by simply sharing the intimate details of their personal lives with other internet users.

While my thesis focuses on Lil Miquela, she is not the only, first, nor the most popular virtual influencer. Characters like Lu Du Magalu, who acts as a mascot for the Brazilian online department store Magazine Luiza, has more than double Miquela's followers on Instagram. At the same time virtual influencers like the now defunct bee_nfluencer operated as a spokesperson for the Foundation de France's bee conservation efforts. Papers from Antonio Batista da Silva Oliveira and Paula Chimenti (2021) and Abhinav Choudhry et al. (2022) have proposed ways to categorize virtual influencers based on characteristics like visual appearance and the kinds of industries they represent. In Japan, animated characters like Hatsune Miku sell out concerts and

enjoy widespread celebrity-like status. A conference presentation from Rachel Berryman et al. (2021) "offers a topography of virtual influencers," tracing their development back through classic Hollywood and the early anime industry. Her forthcoming dissertation is set to expand on this discussion. Other early career researchers like Katherine Pan (2023) have explored the connection of virtual influencers to mannequins. Much like me, my peers are looking for ways to understand the contexts and virtual influencers emerge from.

Of course, the marketing industry remains the context influencers, virtual and otherwise, remain most associated with. In the following section, I explore influencer marketing literature.

Influencers & Marketing

While a few studies have explored topics such as how virtual influencers frame understandings of racialized people online (Sobande, 2021), and what the ethical differences are between the use of virtual and human influencers in advertising (Robinson, 2020), much of the literature focuses on improving virtual influencers as marketing tool. Topics in this category have explored virtual influencer persuasion strategies (Zalake et al., 2021), their social media presence (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021), when and where to use virtual influencers (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021; Block & Lovegrove, 2021; Sookkaew & Saephoo, 2021), how successful they are at selling products to users (Choudhry et al., 2022), and ways to bring true AI technologies into the development and management of these characters (Sands et al., 2022; Thomas & Fowler, 2021; Whittaker et al., 2021).

Of course, there is a robust body of literature on the use of human influencers as marketing tools as well. Influencer marketing has become highly rationalized, with researchers debating when to use influencers with larger audiences, and when to use influencers with more dedicated smaller followings (De Veirman et al., 2017); how tightly brands can control

influencer messaging before followers become uninterested (Martínez-López et al., 2020); and how influencers compare to traditional celebrities as product endorsers (Jin et al., 2019). Much of this literature finds that influencers are highly effective marketing tools, encouraging the continued growth of the influencer industry (Cornwell & Katz, 2020).

Despite influencers' high value for advertisers, their relationship is straining. Many of the issues stem from developing legal debates about how influencers should be regulated. Countries like Canada and the United States now require influencers to disclose all advertising partnerships (Ducato, 2020). Disclosures make the capitalistic nature of influencers more visible, ruining the illusion that they are simply people recommending products they like to other people. Individual social media platforms often have differing or competing regulations, and brands, influencers, and marketers must keep these differences in mind when designing cross-platform advertising campaigns (Cunningham & Craig, 2021). Tighter regulations and a history of high-profile influencers becoming embroiled in public controversies have pushed marketers to become more conservative when choosing their influencer partners. A shift towards only the safest and most brand friendly influencers has left many creators with a much more antagonistic relationship with advertisers as creators struggle to maintain both editorial control over their content, while securing the advertising partnerships they rely on as their primary source of income (Shtern & Hill, 2021). However, perhaps the strongest force pushing influencers and the advertising industry apart is the very thing that makes influencers such effective marketing tools: the power they hold over their followers. Influencers present a sort of existential crisis for traditional advertisers and brands, as particularly popular and powerful influencers now have the power to render brands irrelevant just as quickly as they can boost them to international success (Arriagada, 2021). The difficulties these problems present encourage marketers to embrace the

use of virtual influencers, which, if executed successfully, could allow marketers to maintain their power over the industry, skirt regulations, and maintain tighter control over brand messaging.

Influencers & Labour

Associated with the regulatory and power struggles occurring between influencers and advertisers are growing concerns about the conditions of influencer labour. Influencers—aside from an elite few—are an exploited class of workers. Many aspiring influencers participate in uncompensated labour with the hope of graduating to paid work. Few will achieve this goal. Brooke Erin Duffy (2018) has dubbed this aspirational labour: a form of "(mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated idea of getting paid to do what you love" (p. 4). Businesses that rely on aspiration labour encourage young, mostly female, creatives to put in long hours and work for exposure with the promise that their hard work will eventually 'pay off' and they will eventually earn a "fulfilling and perhaps lucrative career" (p. 5). Duffy argues that online forms of aspirational labour grow out of the glamour industries' long love affair with exploitative labour practices. Young professionals hoping to break into their desired field via unpaid internship programs are most often the industry's target of exploitation. Condé Nast—the publisher of major fashion magazines like *GQ*, *Vogue*, and *Vanity Fair*—shuttered its internship program in 2013 following a US Supreme Court ruling that the publisher was violating American labour standards (p. 14). Instead of improving the ethical foundations of their stewardship programs, the fashion industry at large found a new category of workers to exploit: aspiring social media influencers. Fashion models, a close offline analogue to the contemporary social media fashion influencer, face many of the same labour expectations as social media influencers (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006). Even when off the job, influencers, like

models, must maintain a persona that is attractive to potential employers, keep followers and fans engaged and continuously increase their social capital. Even when influencers sign contracts with their employers, may never receive the promised compensation for their work (Cunningham & Craig, 2021). At the same time, influencers represent an existential crisis for the advertising industry, constantly threatening to tip the scales of power in the direction of influencers (Arriaga, 2021). Consumers have gradually shifted their trust away from brands towards influencers, who now command outsized power over consumer spending habits. As the industry's current means of exerting power over influencers fail to return the levels of control the industry desires, marketers have begun looking for other ways to reign in control. One way they are trying to do this is by shifting the labour force away from contracted human spokespeople and towards small teams of employees managing corporately owned virtual influencers.

Labour in the Virtual Influencer Industry

We do not know much about the working conditions at virtual influencer companies like Brud. These are not publicly traded companies, and they tend to be secretive about their operations. Given the prevalence of non-disclosure agreements among Silicon Valley tech firms preventing workers from discussing their jobs, the secrecy of virtual influencer companies is not surprising, but it does make it difficult to know for sure what is happening inside their offices (Lobel, 2018; Woodcock, 2019, p. 63). Given enough time (the virtual influencer industry is not even a decade old) reliable information about labour conditions at companies like Brud will leak out. For the time being, however, we must rely on literature concerning associated industries to give us an idea of what labour at a company like Brud looks like.

This lack of primary data on the labour that goes into creating virtual influencers has led me to literature on three related industries: animation, games development, and community

management. Animation, as the oldest industry examined, provides a historical overview of how labour conditions in corporately controlled creative industries have evolved over time. From the unionization movement of the industry's early years (Friedman, 2022; Deneroff, 1987), to the steady deprivation of labour standards through the end of the twentieth century (Gadassik, 2021; Tschang & Goldstein, 2010; Stahl, 2005), and the eventual arrival at the highly alienating, precarious, and Taylorized animation industry of today (Stahl, 2010). Of note for my thesis is the labour conditions of motion and performance capture animators (Mihailova, 2016), a trade that effectively bridges the gap between animation, games design, and virtual influencer creation.

As the games industry has reached massive scales, it too has become highly Taylorized and alienating for workers (Woodcock, 2019). Increasingly financialized, games studios are precarious workplaces with boom-and-bust cycles governed by the whims of the global games market (Bulut, 2020). Employers often try to convince workers—many of whom are driven by a deep passion for the industry and a lifelong love of videogames—to engage in extended periods of unpaid overtime, and accept stock options instead of wage increases, while using a system of wide-reaching non-disclosure and non-disparagement agreements to prevent workers from discussing the industry's untenable labour expectations (Cote & Harris, 2021; Woodcock, 2019).

A spin-off of games development, and an industry equally committed to the devaluation of its workforce, is community management. Community managers are the individuals responsible for interacting with a game or brand's online community. These are feminized roles requiring high levels of emotional labour, low levels of autonomy, near unlimited availability, and, generally, go undervalued by management (deWinter et al., 2017; Kerr & Kelleher, 2015; Miliopoulou, 2021).

This brings me to the literature about the wider labour and economic context virtual influencer companies exist within. As David Hesmondhalgh (2018) explained, the cultural industries have long sought the capitalistic goals of reducing risks while increasing profits. Corporate convergence, the cultivation of a passion driven workforce, and manufactured precarity have all helped media bosses achieve these aims. Furthering the precarious and undervalued position of creative workers is a trend toward the always-online employee. As Melissa Gregg (2011) pointed out, networked technologies collapse work and personal spaces, increasing managers' abilities to contact and make demands of employees outside of typical working hours. Happening in parallel to employers' continued demand for greater access to workers' time, companies have also sought to cheapen labour as much as possible. In Kylie Jarrett's (2022) argument, big tech firms have perfected their Taylorization efforts, making work so precarious that even highly skilled workers are now easily replaceable components of a perpetual motion machine. There is no reason to believe the virtual influencer industry will not follow these trends.

Virtual influencers are a business, but they are also a social media product. In order to make sense on users' feeds, virtual influencers need to adhere to certain rules and expectations. To seem like she 'fits in' on platforms like Instagram, Miquela's creators need to make sure she adheres to, or engagingly pushes against, the space's social rules. As with any other social space, individuals who do not conform to the expected norms of a social media platform will fail to build popularity and other users may actively avoid their content. The next section surveys literature on the user social media practices and forms of self-presentation that create the conditions necessary for Miquela to exist and succeed.

Social Media Practices

Social media users often present in ways online that make them look more similar to Miquela than not. For instance, Instagram users employ photo editing software to change or enhance their features. Instead of presenting their selves in the offline world, users choose to manufacture physical features that better align with Instagram's beauty standards (Lavrence & Cambre, 2020). Skin becomes unnaturally smooth, eyes enlarged beyond normal proportions, and bodies tapered or swollen where users desire. While users undertake these self-presentation and photo editing practices with the express goal of meeting Instagram's ever-changing beauty norms, they also help blur the line between reality and animation. Instagram's persistent photo touch-up culture has created an environment where users' images can seem somewhat unnatural without moving outside of the platform's acceptable forms of visual presentation. This means virtual influencers like Miquela do not need to look 'real' to fit in on Instagram. The popularity of photo editing and unnatural self-presentation among users works to Miquela's advantage, mitigating the alienation her uncanny appearance might have on followers. As long as Miquela looks close enough to what an edited photo of an average user looks like, then Miquela already appears to *belong* on Instagram.

Miquela also employs other social media practices like frequent self-disclosure. Over time, influencers have turned self-disclosure itself into a genre of online content (Raun, 2018). By genre-fying self-disclosure and the presentation of the intimate self, social media users have come to expect influencers to use certain narrative conventions and visual cues in their content. Becoming a genre makes influencer content predictable and repeatable—a fact Miquela's creators know and use to their advantage. Influencers use self-disclosure as a means of developing relationships with followers and improving their ability to sell products, and regular

users engage in the practice to boost their own online popularity (Kennedy, 2018; Dobson et al., 2018). The sorts of self-disclosure users engage in online mirrors what we see in offline relationships—people expect and desire sharing of intimate knowledge, seeing it as a necessary part of developing deep and intimate relationships. Here, again, Miquela's creators prove she belongs on Instagram by engaging in self-disclosure and adhering to user expectations of what both influencers and regular users do on the platform.

However, the use of self-disclosure practices is not enough to prevent Miquela's followers from becoming alienated—they must also find her relatable. As Akane Kanai (2019) explained, relatability has also become a genre of online content. She defines the relatability genre by the use of image macros and captions expressing a failure to achieve normative white middle class femininity while maintaining reasonable proximity to it. Relatable content does not portray the actual creator, riffing on memes and pop culture images instead. Successful relatable content does not need to express a truely universal experience, but it must present something that is close enough to a shared experience that followers can find some relatable nugget within it. Even without being a real person Miquela's creators can use this genre to make hers seem relatable to her followers. Ken Hillis' (2015) work on the affective properties of digital avatars comes into play here as well. Hillis argued that internet users have come to see avatars in online multiplayer video games as semiotic representations of human users. Player avatars point to a singular human user whom other users interact with via their own digital avatars, sharing the same space and existing under the same societal expectations. Further, Liam Bullingham and Ana Vasconcelos (2013) found that users view their own avatars as extensions of their offline selves. As such, users understand avatars as both representatives of the self and of others. These

user understandings of avatars prefigure Miquela as something internet users already associate with other human users, and therefore positions her available for intimate relationships.

Another way Miquela's creators make her appealing to social media users is through strategic references to the history of women's entertainment media. While not discussed frequently throughout the body of my thesis, understanding Miquela as part of a history of female-targeted media has deeply influenced how I think about her. Considering Miquela's social media feeds as a form of entertainment helps recentre the users in this discussion and allows us to understand what followers get from interacting with her. It is my small attempt at acknowledging that there are other, perhaps less pessimistic, lenses through which we can examine virtual influencers and conceptualizing Miquela in this way rounds out the discussion on why and how she has become popular.

Women's Entertainment

The limited leisure time of female audiences has had a huge effect on the shape of contemporary women's entertainment. Ruth Schwartz Cowan (2008) argued that so-called labour-saving technologies introduced in the early twentieth century have facilitated the continued overwork of women into modernity. While these technologies reduce the amount of work women do at home, they do not eliminate it. We still need to collect, fold, and put away laundry even when a machine washes it. This came in stark contrast to the male experience of the day. The advent of things like gas furnaces and professionalized fuel delivery eliminated traditionally masculine household tasks, like collecting wood to burn in the family hearth. Further, newly introduced labour laws which set a maximum number of working hours per week left men with much more leisure time than they previously enjoyed. Occurring alongside the development of these household technologies was the mass entrance of women into the paid

workforce (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Society now expected women to be both wage earners *and* homemakers, while placing little pressure on men to use their newfound free time to help with feminine coded labour. New consumer technologies reduced women's household labour just enough that they could do it outside of paid employment hours but left them with little to no leisure time.

Forms of entertainment marketed to female audiences had to fit into the modern woman's busy life. Genres like the romance novel came in to fill this need. With their easy to follow, predictable plot lines, and recurring tropes, romances were easy for busy mothers to dip into when they had a few spare moments (Radway, 2009). Soap operas filled a similar role in the TV age. Their high number of commercial breaks, frequent recaps, and lack of definitive beginning or end allowed women conducting household labour to keep up with the narrative even if they caught only a few minutes as they walked past the TV, moving from one task to another (Harington & Bielby, 1995). Moving into more contemporary forms of entertainment media, both romcom movies and girl's videogames have borrowed heavily from the patterns established by romance novels and soaps, taking on structures and narratives that are meant to be easy for overworked women to pick up and enjoy in short intervals (Cohen, 2010; Chess, 2017).

In addition to their easy to engage with plot lines, women's media also trades on an aspirational materiality. Paula Cohen (2010) called this the female gaze, arguing the visual stylings of characters in romcoms is often more important than the film's narrative. Romcoms appeal to the materialistic values of their viewers and teaches them how to integrate material things into their own lives. Expanding on her writing, I argue this materiality also serves the easy-to-pick-up goals of women's entertainment. Seeing a character in a highly stylized and idealized setting makes the narrative action of the movie easy to grasp, even at a glance.

Common narrative tropes like the ‘bad date’ or ‘the makeover’ are instantly recognizable by the movie’s visual-audio cues, and viewers can pick up on their narrative meaning with low-effort.

Women’s lifestyle influencer content eventually comes to mimic the genre conventions discussed above, focusing on materially centred visuals, and short, easy to pick up posts. In some ways lifestyle influencers actualize the fiction of these genres, presenting only the most romantic and photogenic aspects of their lives. These conventions are in turn used by Miquela’s creators as a launching point for Miquela’s presentation wherein influencer content is re-fictionalized and writers explicitly reference soaps and romcoms alongside the genre tropes associated with social media influencer content.

Conclusion

The young nature of the virtual influencer industry means literature on the subject remains limited. As such, the foundations of my thesis are works from other related research areas. Influencer studies creates the context for the socio-cultural positions of human influencers, and the roles virtual influencers seek to replicate. The power struggles between popular influencers and brands set the stage for a transition from independent human influencers to corporately controlled virtual influencers.

Further, this research examines the labour influencers take on to develop the relationships with followers that marketers prize. The steady genre-fication of influencer content makes it repeatable and exploitable by corporate actors. A history of digital avatars as affective representations of human users furthers Miquela’s position as a relatable and believable internet celebrity.

Finally, I make a set of assumptions about labour conditions in the virtual influencer industry based on texts concerning the labour of animators, games developers and community

managers. These industries follow broader employment trends of increasingly precarious and feminized employment arrangements within the tech and cultural industries. I presume the virtual influencer industry is not immune to these trends. The following chapter covers the specific trends that have led marketers to embrace virtual influencers.

Chapter 3

Virtual Influence and Control: A Political Economy of Virtual Influencers

This chapter addresses my first research question: How does the advertising industry benefit in the shift from human influencers to virtual ones and the veiling of influencer labour from users' view? I argue that this shift allows brands and marketers to regain control over the field of advertising. As the biggest influencers have grown their cultural capital, marketers have in turn ceded power to them. Consumer trust has concentrated on popular influencers, and brands allocat an ever-increasing amount of their marketing spend to influencer campaigns. Further, American influencers' recent unionization efforts make them more expensive to work with and less exploitable than they historically have been. Influencer marketing has also become associated with a certain level of risk, as several big names influencers have become controversial figures in recent years. As third parties with minimal oversight and increasing cultural capital, influencers have become more expensive and unpredictable brand partners. To reduce risk, regain control, and move towards a more easily exploitable workforce, brands have begun moving towards the use of virtual influencers.

Existing research on virtual influencers has explored expert opinions on their effectiveness as marketing tools (Moustakas et al., 2020); developed categories under which to evaluate virtual influencers (Batista da Silva & Chimenti, 2021); and discussed the moral issues coinciding with developing virtual identities difficult to discern from "real life" (Robinson, 2020, p. 1). Still underexplored is a political economy analysis of virtual influencers. My research falls within a lineage of political economy of the media, a discipline which "endeavors to connect how media and communication systems and content are shaped by ownership, labour practices, and government policies" (McChesney, 2008, p. 12). This chapter brings a political economy analysis of the virtual influencer industry by examining the changing labour status of influencers.

While still an exploited class of labourers, influencers have steadily gained power over the brands and marketers who employ them via the establishment of social capital, union organization, and state regulations drafted in influencers' favour. By framing influencer labour in this way, I show that brands and advertisers look to virtual influencers as a means of transitioning towards a more easily exploitable workforce, while simultaneous recentring consumer trust on the brands. I open the discussion with an overview of the economic state of the influencer industry.

The Economics of Influence

Brands spend a lot of money on influencers. Between 2016 and 2021 the global market size of the influencer industry increased more than 710 percent, up to USD$16.4B from USD$1.7B (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022, p. 10). Moving into 2022, 77 percent of businesses surveyed by Influencer Marketing Hub said they are "dedicating a budget to influencer marketing" (p. 34). These impressive numbers have helped assuage any concerns that shelter-in-place orders implemented following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic would hinder the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns. During the lockdowns screen time among adolescents spiked as individuals turned to the internet for entertainment and increased their use of web-based tools to keep in touch with loved ones, allowing influencers to get more time in front of users (Nagata et al., 2022; Statistics Canada, 2021). At the same time, the influencer industry has faced strong criticisms. Researchers called out influencers for aiding in disinformation campaigns (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2022), engaging in unethical advertising practices (Bladow, 2018), and lowering body image satisfaction of social media users (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; Wells et al., 2021). However, none of these issues seem to have had a meaningful economic effect on the influencer industry.

The steady growth and high revenue potential of influencer marketing has made it a competitive space, forcing marketers and would-be influencers to come up with creative means of winning user attention and keeping their trust. Virtual influencers like Lil Miquela are one way brands try to stand out in this crowded arena. Infinitely manipulatable and exploitable, virtual influencers allow brands near total control over the influencers under their employ. Brands hope they can at once manufacture virtual influencers to meet the exact desires of social media users, while also avoiding the problems currently associated with the influencer industry. It is a plan that appears to be working for the biggest players in the space. The following section evaluates the success of one of those companies, Brud, Inc.

Possessed Bodies: Virtual Influencer Ownership

Brud: A Brief History

A report published by *OnBuy* estimates Miquela made as much as USD$17.3 million in 2022 for Brud, the LA-based tech firm which created her and manages her social media accounts alongside a handful of other (less popular) virtual influencers (Steele, 2022). Though details about the company's founding and finances are scarce, we know Trevor McFedries and Sara Decou founded the company (Business of Fashion, 2018). A California corporate registration form shows McFedries incorporated Brud in Delaware on 3 June 2016, several weeks after Lil Miquela made her debut on 23 April of the same year (McFedries, 2017). According to Decou's LinkedIn, she left the company in 2019; McFedries remains Brud's CEO (DeCou, n.d.; McFedries, n.d.).

From 2016 to 2018 Brud intentionally refrained from divulging their role in creating Miquela, instead choosing to focus on developing the public notoriety of their virtual influencer. Instead of claiming ownership of Miquela, Brud encouraged followers and reporters to discuss

and debate Miquela's realness and origins. While displaying tell-tale signs of computer imagery, Miquela's appearance was just real enough to spark debate about whether she was a wholly fabricated character, or a real model who had heavily edited her looks. Maya Oppenheim's 2016 reporting on Miquela is a good representation of how social media users were thinking about Miquela in the early days of her existence.

> In the 13 weeks since she created her account, Lil Miquela has amassed 65,000 followers. In that time, she has pushed her followers into a delirium of confusion as to whether or not she is real. While some are adamant she is a computer generated image, others think Lil Miquela is a real person which has been heavily edited online. "Is she real or fake?" users repeatedly ask in hundreds of comments below her photos. (Oppenheim, 2016)

Her scripting was highly compelling as well. From the pithy, youthful nature of her Instagram captions, to the way she interacted with commenters, Miquela 'spoke' in a way that was authentic to her character. In many ways, the mystery of who was behind Miquela, and why she existed was the real draw for her in her first two years (Dewey, 2016).

In spring 2018, Brud had decided it was time to come out as Miquela's creator. An elaborate story played out on Miquela's Instagram profile that included a faked hacking of her account, an admission that was once and for all a virtual being, and identifying Brud as the company that owned her (Petrarca, 2018).

This strategy of obfuscation worked out well for Brud. Days after Brud claimed ownership over Miquela, reporting of the company's big-name backers began circulating online. Reporting suggests Brud generated around US$6 million during their 2018 funding round, securing investments from notable venture capital firms like Sequoia Capital (Shieber, 2018). Brud's profile continued to rise through 2019, as they kicked off a second round of funding, this

time led by Spark Capital. Here, Brud pulled in somewhere between US$20 and 30 million, putting their valuation near US$125 million (Shieber, 2019). At this point Brud was ready to move into their final stage of life as a start-up and began looking for buyers.

Miquela and the Metaverse

In October of 2021 Dapper Labs, a company focused on NFT and blockchain technologies, most notable for their work on the CryptoKitties and NBA Top Shot NFT collections, acquired Brud (Hayward, 2021). Neither Dapper Labs nor Brud disclosed the final sales price, but Dapper Labs announced that Brud's entire 32-person team was included in the merger. What Brud's acquisition means for Miquela's ongoing development is unclear, though in a tweet McFedries claimed he would continue "pushing the envelope with Miquela and other original IP" (McFedries, 2021). Suggested in the merger announcement was that Miquela would become a site for "community building and social storytelling" via decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs). Miquela and Brud's futures seem tied to the development of technologies like DAOs and NFTs, and it is worth spending some time here to define these terms and how Miquela interacts with them.

DAOs are web-based organizational structures intended to replace or reproduce the basic functions of a publicly traded company, where voting rights are determined by ownership of an organizationally distributed digital token instead of company shares (Hassan & De Filippi, 2021). As *Harvard Business Review* editor Thomas Stackpole (2022) put it, we might think of DAOs as "headless corporations," where the organization's actions are determined by member consensus as opposed to a board of executives. In theory, becoming token-holding members of a DAO allows Miquela's audience a level of decision-making in how her story continues to unfold, potentially increasing follower interest in the character and the business' success in

similar ways that stock options psychologically bind workers to their employers (Bulut, 2020, p. 5; more on this in Chapter Five this thesis).

DAOs are only one of the ways virtual influencers interact with web3[1] technologies. NFTs, or non-fungible tokens, are Dapper Labs' primary product. NFTs are pieces of code which represents the authenticity and ownership of a digital good (Wang et al., 2021, p. 2) and gained popularity as a means for selling and authenticating digital artworks in early 2021 (Vasan et al., 2022, p. 2). To date, the NFT market has been "dominated by speculative trading" with consumers buying and selling in the hope of achieving massive gains on their investments (Chalmers et al., 2022, p. 7). Brud went on to sell a series of Miquela NFTs in 2022, which holders could use as both social media profile pictures and proof of membership to Miquela's metaverse space, Villa M.

Metaverses are yet another developing internet technology entangled with the future of virtual influencers. A metaverse is "a virtual environment blending the physical and digital" (Lee et al., 2021, p. 1). Users represent their selves via digital avatars, and metaverse architects intend for users to see these spaces as extensions of their offline social lives, with users maintaining social continuity across the digital and physical worlds. Metaverses represent a merging of networked digital spaces like *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life* and social networks, tying real world identities to users' online representations. Mark Zuckerberg renamed the Facebook parent company to Meta in 2021, shifting the corporation's focus from its namesake social media network towards a new metaverse platform (Meta, 2021). The hope of Zuckerberg and other metaverse builders is to further entrench people into their platforms, creating seamless

[1] Web3 represents a proposed shift towards decentralized ownership of the internet enabled by blockchain technologies, a so-called distributed and immutable ledger. A network of computers hosts the ledger and validates it via the consensus of what the ledger contains. See Ragnedda & Destefanis, 2019; Stackpole, 2022 for an extended discussion and definition of web3 related technologies.

integration of digital and offline life and allowing for as much human interaction as possible—from work and dating, to entertainment and creative practices—to happen within metaverse borders (Newton, 2021). If individuals make the transition to the online worlds these technologies promise the distinction between a 'real' person's representative avatar and a wholly fictional character shrinks. Brands already implementing virtual-first strategies are likely to have an edge over the competition if the metaverse evolves in ways evangelists hope.

In sum, Brud deploys these technologies as means of increasing followers' psycho-emotional bonds to their products. Followers buy Miquela's NFTs as both speculative investments with the potential to increase in market value with the popularity of the character, and as proof of membership to the DAO which manages her. In this way Miquela's followers become stakeholders with a personal interest in Brud's success. Miquela's members-only metaverse club and a general encouragement for social media users to blend their digital and offline lives as much as possible pushes users to further their interest in and connection to Brud. This represents a shift for Brud where Miquela is not solely a marketing vehicle for consumer goods, but one where she is commodified herself, available for purchase, ownership, and speculation by her community, while potentially allowing Brud access to the data generated by users of their metaverse platform. This, in turn, allows Brud to secure more lucrative marketing deals, selling more products back to Miquela's followers, and expanding her social presence even further. In its most successful form it is a business triple-tapping their audience by encouraging them to directly buy in with the purchase of NFTs; mining the data they generate in their metaverse products to improve their advertising potentials; and providing a strong return on investment for their brand partners by marketing goods to Miquela's followers. I know this pitch sounds unrealistic and I do not want to suggest it is an attainable goal for the company. In fact,

there is good reason to believe Brud will not achieve these aims. Continued revenue loses at Meta and calls from investors for the company "to reduce its spending on the metaverse" suggest the technology's future may be limited, (Wang, 2023) and the recent collapse of the NFT market has made them less desirable investments (Brooks, 2022). Regardless, it is important to note that Brud sees NFTs, metaverses, web3, and associated technologies as the next step for their business, and the relationship between web3 and virtual influencers, and what that means for users, offers a pathway for future research.

My focus, however, is on the use of Miquela as she exists today. While Brud may be working towards new uses for their virtual influencer, she continues to exist primarily as a replacement for human influencers. In the following section I will discuss the influencer labour market and how virtual influencers like Miquela fit within it.

(Virtual) Labour

Labour Relations in the Industry of Influence

While the purchase swaying power of influencers is frequently leveraged by marketing firms to great success, the relationship between influencers and traditional ad agencies is not frictionless. The same consumer affecting powers that make influencers such a valuable tool for advertisers simultaneously makes influencers threatening. As Arutro Arriaga (2021) put it, influencers are "challengers in the field of advertising in their claim to better, more pertinent cultural capital, [and] being more in touch with consumers via their ability to create attractive content for their audiences" (p. 235). The perceived authenticity of influencers makes them relatable to their audiences in ways traditional marketing strategies are not. Even personality-based campaigns like celebrity endorsements do not offer the same kind of perceived authenticity that audiences get from influencers (p. 237). As such, brands may feel like they need

to work with influencers to execute successful ad campaigns, thus positioning the locus of control as external to brands and threatening their future control of the space. This tenuous relationship means brands seek to control the influencers they work with to the highest degree possible.

Marketers place tight restrictions on how influencers can discuss and present the products they promote, reducing the influencer's ability to tap into their personal brand and the authentic voice followers look for (Arriaga, 2021, p. 241). Pay is another area where marketers try to assert their power over influencers. Marketers may attempt to frame the agency-influencer relationship as a "collaboration," suggesting that since the partnership creates opportunities to create exciting new content for their followers, the advertising brand is not obligated to pay the influencers for their labour. At best, this means marketers invite influencers to a press event featuring extremely Instagramable photo opportunities, and at worst send them nothing more than a press release to blast onto their social feeds. Influencers may also receive free products, or extended trials for subscription-based services. Brands and marketers avoid actual exchange of money for labour whenever possible, limiting influencers' ability to generate the capital needed to both grow their business in meaningful ways and pay their rent at the same time (p. 240, 245). Even when creators do get paid for their sponsored content they may alienate their fans in the process. This is because fans often see taking brand deals as a form of selling out, or as simply inauthentic to that creator's voice. As the YouTuber Gabby Dunn explained in her piece for *Splinter* (2015), taking on a brand deal means she "makes money but loses subscribers." As subscriber counts dictate the amount and quality of sponsorship deals a creator can get, taking on sponsorships gives influencers like Dunn a source of income in the here-and-now at the expense of potential ongoing and future success and financial stability. It is the creator's double bind.

Influencers United: Content Creators and Labour Movements

In the face of insistent exploitation there have been several attempts to push influencers and other online creators towards collective action. The first notable example was Hank Green's Internet Creators Guild, which launched in 2016 and supported creators by advocating for better contract terms and stronger platform relations. The organization shuttered in 2019, having made little success in its stated goals.

Other organizations followed in Green's footsteps and attempted to achieve the same goals. Germany's FairTube (formerly the YouTubers Union) generated some media buzz in 2019, when YouTube said it would not negotiate with the organization (Cunningham & Craig, 2021, pp. 279–80; Stephen, 2019). The organization has failed to make much progress since then and a cursory glance at their social media accounts and official website shows little activity in the intervening years (FairTube, n.d.). 2020 saw the launch of both the UK-based Creator Union and "invite-only non-profit trade association" The American Influencer Council (Lorenz, 2021). The Creator Union failed to get off the ground and seems to have ceased operations, while the AIC by its very nature only helps those it invites into its ranks. These and other small bottom-up efforts such as the Twitch streamers strike of 1 September 2021 have helped push creator labour issues into the public eye (Jin et al., 2021).

However, the influencer labour movement's biggest win came from its alignment with Hollywood. In 2021 the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA, n.d.) launched their Influencer Agreement, allowing creators working on a variety of social media platforms access to one of the entertainment industry's most powerful unions (Lorenz, 2021). Qualifying members now have healthcare and pension plans, standardized contracts, and resources for dealing with payment disputes and other problems with

sponsors. The SAG-AFTRA announcement served as a major step forward for levelling the playing field between creators and the brands that hire them.

Despite this, the agreement leaves something to be desired. First, the agreement does not cover certain kinds of content, namely still photography and pornographic content. This leaves Instagrammers at somewhat of a disadvantage when compared to their peers and continues a history of delegitimizing sex work and concerns for the people who work in this industry (SAG-AFTRA, n.d.). Second, unlike the standard contracts offered to SAG-AFTRA members working in film or TV, creator contracts do not have payment minimums, and the individuals remain responsible for negotiating their own rates. Finally, the union will not "negotiate directly or on an individual basis with the social media platforms themselves" (Lorenz, 2021). This means that creators who generate some or all of their income through direct fan payments via platforms like Patreon, or revenue split programs offered by the likes of YouTube cannot rely on SAG-AFTRA to help them improve their situation in these places. Still, the unionization of content creators legitimizes influencer labour and explicitly positions them as workers who deserve fair financial compensation, making them less exploitable by brands and marketers. All of this gives more power to content creators and makes them more expensive to employ, pushing brands and advertisers to seek for new, cheaper alternatives to influencers' services.

Transitioning to a 'virtual workforce' is one way for brands to wrestle back control. More than simply replacing a human influencer who is now more expensive to work with (though it is almost certainly cheaper to photoshop someone onto Shibuya Crossing than it is to fly them out there and organize a photo shoot, regardless of union representation) virtual influencers also serve to obscure the labour of their creation. Influencers often try to hide the labour involved with making their content with the goal of appearing authentically and effortlessly glamourous.

At the same time, a steady stream of editorials like Gabby Dunn's (2015) referenced above and the increasing prevalence of creator burnout (Thorne, 2023) reveals the behind the scenes labour of being an influencer to followers. With virtual influencers it becomes much less clear who is doing the labour and what that labour looks like. This is both because workers are literally hidden from users' view, but also due to the secretive nature of Brud and their contemporaries, who reveal little about working conditions in their offices. But, as Kylie Jarrett (2022, p. 40–42) explained, precarity has become the defining feature of labour in the digital industries, with low wages, unpaid and mandatory overtime, and low job security now the norm. Crunch, the practice of excessive and unpaid overtime common in the games industry, seems like a trend destined to become the reality for the animators and writers who bring Miquela et al. to life (Weststar et al., 2021, p. 4). I will discuss the potential labour conditions of virtual influencer creators in depth in Chapter Five. Moving away from labour consideration, I will discuss the regulatory frameworks surrounding influencers and some of the legal considerations involved with the shift towards virtual influencers.

Virtually Legal: State Regulation of Virtual Influencers

The United States: The Standard-Bearer

US law requires influencers to disclose if they created their content in partnership with advertisers, and several other Global North countries have referenced this policy in their own lawmaking (Shtern & Hill, 2021, p. 256, 262). Since these regulations do not include virtual influencers, the law does not require Miquela or other virtual influencers to disclose their brand partnerships. However, disregard for existing disclosure regulations is common and meaningful policing of these policies is not happening either, giving virtual influencers little legal advantage over their human counterparts in this regard (p. 256). However, given growing concerns about

corporate transparency in the public discourse, especially with concern towards tech and advertising, things may be changing.

In February 2020 the FTC began seeking public comments on its endorsement guidelines, which drew comments from consumer advocacy groups like Truth in Advertising (TINA). TINA has called on the FTC to specifically include regulations for virtual influencers in their upcoming updates to the endorsement disclosure policies. TINA made four requests of the FTC: (1) explicitly "include virtual influencers" in their endorsement policies; (2) require virtual influencers to "clearly and conspicuously disclose" any "material connection … between the creator and/or owner of the virtual influencer and the promoted brand"; (3) find some way to deal with the fact that virtual influencers are incapable of adhering to current guidelines "which require that the endorsement reflect the honest opinions of the influencer"; and (4) to require virtual influencers to "disclose that they are not humans … in all promotional posts" (Truth in Advertising, 2020). In response to these comments the FTC has proposed an update to the definition of who classifies as an endorser which would include virtual influencers:

> Section 255.0(b) also currently states that an "endorser" may be an individual, group, or institution. The Commission proposes a modification indicating that an endorser could instead simply *appear* to be an individual, group, or institution. *Thus, the Guides would clearly apply to endorsements by fabricated endorsers*. (Federal Trade Commission, 16 July 2022, p. 9; emphasis added).

The FTC's proposed amendments do not necessarily address all concerns groups like TINA and others have raised and it remains unclear if, when, and in what form US lawmakers will approve them anyway. For now, this signals only the intention of the American government to regulate virtual influencers. US-based regulation of virtual influencers is particularly important since

some of the biggest players in the space (ex: Brud, Superplastic, Shadows) are all American companies and therefore regulating them at home will be most effective. Further, as Jeremy Shtern and Stephanie Hill (2021) pointed out, other key social media markets like Canada and the United Kingdom have traditionally followed the example of the FTC in the creation of their own regulations for online product endorsements (p. 262). Thus, a regulatory ripple-affect will likely take place as other Global North nations begin to follow the lead of US lawmakers.

Canada and the UK: Following Behind

Nations that tend to follow American digital media regulations, like Canada and the UK, have yet to take meaningful action on regulating virtual influencers. In Canada, the Competition Act states product endorses must not misrepresent their "material" connection to the business, product, or service they are promoting (Competition Act, 1985). While the Competition Bureau has general guidelines for social media influencers, these guidelines do not mention virtual influencers, nor are influencers human or virtual named in the *Competition Act*. Ad Standards, the Canadian advertising industry's self-regulating body, currently defines influencers as "a person or group" with the potential to "change opinion/behavior" of others (Influencer Marketing Steering Committee, 2020, p. 5). Here, again, the regulations do not specifically name virtual influencers, through virtual influencers could potentially be defined as a representative of a group given their corporate ownership. Further, Ad Standards may see undisclosed virtual influencer marketing as a violation of the *Canadian Code of Advertising Standards*' Clause 2 which prohibits advertisements from being "presented in a format or style that conceals the fact that it is an advertisement" (Ad Standards, 2019). Of course, these speculations are as of yet untested, nor am I a legal scholar, but it is evident that under certain definitions current Canadian advertising regulations may be brought to bear on virtual influencers.

The situation in the UK is much the same to that in Canada. The Competition and Market Authority, a non-ministerial government department responsible for regulating anti-competitive business activities, works together with the Advertising Standards Authority and the Committee of Advertising Practice, the UK's advertising industry's two self-regulatory bodies, to regulate advertising practices in the country. Here, again, the UK's various guidelines on the use of influencer marketing (Committee of Advertising Practices & Competition & Markets Authority, 2022; Competition & Markets Authority, 2022a, 2022b) state that product endorsers must clearly disclose any brand partnerships but makes no reference to the use of virtual influencers in advertising campaigns. As in Canada, there are requirements for advertisements to "be obviously identifiable as such" which regulators and platforms could possibly interpret to include the undisclosed use of virtual influencers (Committee of Advertising Practice, 2014, p. 15).

India: Proactive Regulations

India is one key social media market that has put forth regulations directly targeting virtual influencers. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), the country's self-regulatory board for the advertising industry, implemented new rules in 2021 addressing the problem. ASCI's *Guidelines for Influencers Advertising in Digital Media* states virtual influencers are subject to the same disclosure requirements as their human counterparts. This includes making an easy to find and understand disclosure of any material connection between a virtual influencer and an advertiser. This is similar to the FTC's proposed changes to American endorsement regulations. However, the ASCI hold virtual influencers to the additional requirement of disclosing "to consumers that they are not interacting with a real human being" (p. 15). While virtual influencers are often recognizable as fictional characters (and indeed, characters like Lil Miquela make their fictious nature part of their narrative and appeal) it is

reasonable to assume that future iterations of virtual influencers may not be. Certainly, potential futures where internet users join large metaverse communities where the representation of humans and non-humans by digital avatars makes the two near indistinguishable, the requirements for disclosure of non-humanness becomes more important. These regulations may make India the only jurisdiction to have regulated virtual influencers to date and as the "fastest-growing internet advertising market in the world," (BI India Partner, 2021) what happens there could have big impacts on the virtual influencer market globally.

Regulatory Challenges Moving Forward

Challenges are likely to persist even if regulations specifically address virtual influencers. Some of the issues with regulating the existing human influencer industry points to why. As it stands now, enforcement of endorsement regulations is most often targeted at individual influencers (Cunningham & Craig, 2021, p. 9). By its nature the influencer industry is a diffuse area of work, comprising of many freelancers vying for contracts with a wide array of consumer-facing companies and advertising agencies. The high number of independent entities makes policing the space effectively challenging, if not impossible. There are simply too many influencers and sponsored posts to keep track of, and many smaller influencers who skirt the laws will fly under the radar by virtue of their limited reach. The corporate nature of the biggest virtual influencers makes them easier to keep track of than human influencers, and their entry to a market already rife with breaches of ethical advertising tactics predisposes virtual influencer companies to scrutiny. That may not always be the case, however. If independent creators begin to make and manage virtual influencers in large numbers, the problem of scale will reproduce itself. However, the relatively high barrier to entry is likely to keep the virtual influencer market small, favouring creators with the access to professional animation and photo manipulation

software, as well as the skills necessary to use them, the time required to manage their characters, and the industry connections needed to create a meaningful customer base. This may change overtime, however, as new labour-saving tools and technologies come to market and make the creation and management of virtual influencers more accessible.

Forward thinking regulation of virtual influencers has the opportunity to solve some of the most pressing issues in human influencer regulation as well. The rules as they exist put the onus of responsibility on the product endorser (i.e., the influencer). If the influencer neglects to disclose their relationship with a business, or releases an intentionally misleading statement about a product, the influencer is the one at fault. Companies may claim a reasonable lack of responsibility for the influencer's actions given the nature of the employment agreement. Businesses may take more of the blame if it comes out that they encouraged or required the influencers they hired to use dishonest tactics, but given the relative lack of access to monetary and legal resources for freelancers, influencers will still shoulder most of the responsibility. Since virtual influencers are likely to largely remain corporately owned and controlled tools, this forces enforcement up the chain. Direct ownership of virtual influencers places the responsibility of conforming to the law on the companies operating them, instead of on the contract labourers who create the content. This has the potential to shift regulatory focus within the influencer industry more generally towards the businesses that hire influencers as opposed to the influencers themselves. Of course, all of this is unproven, and given capitalist nations' relative resistance to prosecute the failings of big business it may also be wishful thinking.

House Rules: Influencer-Platform Relations

The lack of strong or even enforced regulations in many countries has left the fate of influencer marketing largely in the hands of American social media giants like Meta and Google.

The highly publicized controversies surrounding the appearance of ad for family-friendly brands appearing on neo-Nazi content caused the Google owned video hosting platform YouTube to massively overhaul the way they split ad revenues with creators on their platform (Graham & Elias, 2021; Cunningham & Craig, 2021, pp. 277–8). Google now restricts videos deemed controversial from collecting the portion of advertising income they would have otherwise received and prevents ads from running altogether on the most egregious content on the platform. This has meant two things for advertisers on YouTube. First, controversy averse advertisers became much more selective in the kinds of content their advertising was associated with, often choosing to work with only the safest creators possible. Second, this focus on brand safety meant that some of YouTube's biggest stars were no longer viable advertising partners, as several of them had become notorious for their edgy content and questionable politics. In either case, a general desire to be more in control of the settings in which their advertising appears may offer some explanation for the reason why some brands are experimenting with virtual influencers.

Despite this, some advertisers have been reluctant to pull away from influencers involved in even the highest profile controversies. As Sarah Kelly et al.'s (2018) exploration of sports fans' attitudes towards team sponsors post-controversy showed, controversy has little effect on audience perception of sponsors over time. While a first-time scandal is likely to trigger fan backlash against team sponsors, repeated scandals do not trigger the same ire. Kelly et al. suggest this means fans either experience "scandal frequency desensitization" or simply "begin to isolate blame to the specific athlete/team alone" (p. 65). Professional athletes may not be exact proxies for social media influencers, but there is some indication that Kelly et al.'s findings apply to online spaces as well. YouTuber PewDiePie's (real name Felix Kjellberg) widely publicized

fallout has not prevented him from remaining one of YouTube's most successful creators, nor has it stopped him from raking in millions in advertising revenue annually (Geyser, 2021). When you play one of Kjellberg's videos today you are likely to see advertisements from any number of 'family-friendly' brands. The evidence provided here may be too thin to say brands suffer no consequences from association with controversial figures, but it does suggest that the perceived negative effect on brands is not as strong as some argue. It takes more than casual racism to make someone give up on their team. Given the mild long-term consequences of association with a controversial influencer, marketers have little incentive to shift from human to virtual influencers for the sole purpose of scandal-dodging.

Of course, virtual influencers are not without their controversies either. Lil Miquela was involved in a 2019 Calvin Klein campaign accused of "queerbating" (Petrarca, 2019). She also faced backlash earlier the same year over a vlog where she purported to have been sexual assaulted in a rideshare (Song, 2019). Much like with Kjellberg, these controversies seem to have done little damage to Miquela's money-making abilities. One can imagine that cleaning up the messes of a character who can only say what its owners tell it to would be easier than running damage control on a human celebrity with their own will, ego, and (potentially incendiary) ideas of how to handle the situation. Depending on the values of the advertiser in question, this ease of clean up may be enough to push marketers towards virtual influencers.

There are other avenues for virtual influencer controversies to arise from as well. Hackers could seize Lil Miquela's Twitter and use it to post inflammatory comments. A rouge animator could post explicit or violent content to Miquela's Instagram grid. McFedries or other noteworthy individuals involved with Miquela's management could become embroiled in their own controversies, with potential spillover into Miquela's sphere of influence. Virtual

influencers may give the appearance of safe, predictable behavior, but problems are always just a few clicks away.

Motivated by self-protection and well aware of the issues already associated with the influencer industry, Meta has seized on the void of state-level regulation around virtual influencers to develop their own rules. The company announced they would "develop an ethical framework to guide the use of [virtual influencers]" in a blog post published 12 January 2022. Meta has yet to publish the completed framework, though the company's history of "unethical behavior" has some commentators questioning whether Meta is the right organization to be setting the groundwork (Berryman & Leaver, 2022). Historically speaking, platforms like Facebook have developed their own content policies, with little oversight from state powers. As such, it seems unlikely lawmakers will prevent Meta from establishing the rules of play for virtual influencers on their platforms (Cunningham & Craig, 2021, p. 275).

Conclusion

Virtual influencers represent an attempt by the advertising industry to reign in control over the space. The growing power of popular influencers has both re-centred consumer trust in their opinions as opposed to brand messaging. The massive popularity of certain influencers has made them susceptible to widespread backlash and controversy, making them both necessary to gain consumer confidence, and at constant risk of making inflammatory claims. At the same time, a gradually tightening legal framework makes branded partnerships more difficult for influencers to navigate. Failing to follow platform rules can lead to the reduction of post reach or the suspension of an influencer's account. These attributes have encouraged the development of and transition to virtual influencers.

By owning and controlling their own spokespeople, advertisers can ensure maximum brand safety. There will be much less likelihood of unplanned controversies, and companies can reduce the risk of rule breaking or undesirable brand associations. Perhaps most importantly for the advertising industry is that the success of virtual influencers would mean the recoupment of their previous power. It is a response from an industry that feels threatened and is trying to regain control. To succeed in their power grab, however, virtual influencers need to actually work as viable replacements for human influencers, a question I explore in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Virtual Influencers and Relatability

Following the previous discussion on why brands and marketers may want to make the transition from human influencers to virtual ones, this chapter explores the strategies used in making that shift. As the influencer marketplace has matured, the processes through which they create relationships with their followers has become rationalized and genre-fied. Virtual influencer creators distill and employ rationalized genre conventions with the aim of fostering intimate and affective relationships between their characters and social media users. As such, this chapter seeks to answer my second research question: how do virtual influencer creators use existing genre and social media conventions to create successful replacements for human influencers? I approach this question via a textual analysis of Miquela's Instagram content, exploring how her posts conform to, resist, and expand upon two primary genres of social media influencer content. The two genres in question are: the relatable genre, as described by Akane Kanai (2019); and Tobias Raun's (2018) description of the intimate genre. Following this, I explore the ways videogames socialize players to view digital avatars as affective figures and how that sets the stage for social media users to develop intimate relationships with virtual influencers. Understanding how and in what ways virtual influencer creators attempt to build relationships between social media users and their characters helps us continue to develop the everchanging media literacy requirements necessary for a healthy online life. While it is unclear to what extent the existence of virtual influencers changes users' experience of social media, this chapter takes some steps towards building that knowledge by uncovering the goals of those who operate virtual influencers, and the techniques they use to achieve their ends. To begin, I discuss why virtual influencers creators must develop intimate and affective relationships between their

characters and social media users if virtual influencers are to be viable replacements for human influencers.

Sales of Passion

As far as the advertising industry is concerned, social media influencers live or die by their ability to cultivate intimacy (or the perception thereof) with their followers. More than the number of followers, likes, comments, or other common social media metrics, the intensity with which followers bond their selves to an influencer is the mark of influencer success. Intimacy, however, is a decidedly difficult thing to measure. Platforms like Instagram publish follower counts for all to see, and backend tools give creators access to comprehensive data on their engagement metrics. Counting or quantifying intimacy, on the other hand, is not so easy. As far as the advertising industry is concerned, sales are an influencer's raison d'être. The more of their followers an influencer can convince to buy the makeup, subscribe to the meal kit, or play the videogame, the more valuable they become to brands and advertisers, and in turn the more money influencers can demand for their services. A bigger follower count means a bigger audience for an advertiser's message, and a larger pool of potential customers, but it is the intimacy that makes the sale. Users who feel more intensely connected to an influencer have more trust in said influencer's opinions and are more likely to act on the influencer's purchasing advice. A smaller influencer with a group of more highly affected followers is worth more than the largest population of dispassionate observers (Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Wies et al., 2022).

While influencers are particularly good at developing intimate relationships with their followers, they are not the first to seek out deeper relationships with their fans. Success as a media personality has relied on a performer's ability to develop a sense of intimacy with their audience since at least the Golden Age of Television. Horton and Wohl first identified the

phenomenon in 1956 when exploring the relationship between popular television personalities and their audiences. They describe this experience—where the audience feels as if they know the media personality intimately, while the performer only knows the individual viewer as an abstract concept—as a parasocial relationship (p. 215). Media figures cultivate parasocial relationships by re-creating the *feeling* of a one-to-one interaction between the audience and a predictable and charismatic individual. The audiences' repeated interactions with the persona over time furthers the development of parasocial relationships (p. 216, 217). Today, internet-based communications tools and social networks have made it much easier for would-be celebrities to cultivate intimacy with vast numbers of people. Instead of simply broadcasting to audiences in a conversational style, social media celebrities can directly interact and speak *with* followers in real time. This ability to actually converse with followers, alongside the presentation of "an easily consumable persona" and the disclosure of "personal information" serves to intensify the perception of intimacy followers have with social media celebrities (Marwick, 2016, p. 341). This perception of intimacy between social media users and online celebrities makes popular social media personalities valuable product endorsers. Thus, social media influencers emerged as an evolution of the celebrity product endorser, enabled by digital and networked technologies and increased centrality of product consumption in everyday life.

Affect and intimacy are foundational terms for this chapter, and I would like to define them here before moving on to the central discussion. Gilles Deleuze (1981/1988), building off the work of Baruch Spinoza, tells us that affects describe the "transitive" passage from one state of existence to another (p. 48–49). Affects vary in intensity, duration, and their ability to "increase or diminish" the affected's potential to act (Hillis, 2015, p. 6). Affects are not self-actualizing, instead arising from the encounters between bodies, "bodies defined not by an outer

skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 2). In this definition, *affective* or *affecting* bodies trigger the existential transition of the *affected* body when the former encounters the latter. This is not a linear relationship, as bodies are at once affecting and affected, having a continuous and simultaneous, though not necessarily infinite, relationship with the bodies they encounter.

Deleuze (1981/1988) equates affects to "feelings," a comparison that is both potentially illuminating and limiting (p. 49). The term feelings suggests an individual's emotional experience of the present moment, a definition that fails to encompass all of what affect is. We must keep in mind that affect is the direct result of one body encountering another body or bodies, and that bodies constantly and repeatedly encounter other bodies, and therefore feelings undergo constant modifications and are not static. Additionally, as Brian Massumi (2002) argued, it is important not to confuse affect with emotion defining emotion as "qualified intensity" (p. 28). Affect is inherently nonconscious and autonomic, only becoming emotion after the "conscious positioning" of affect into a "narrative" (p. 24). In this way, affect is a bridge between emotional states, triggering a nonconscious and autonomic response from encounters with other bodies which are in turn qualified into conscious emotions.

Intensity is key term in Deleuzian-Spinozist affect theory, introduced by Massumi (2002) to describe the "strength or duration" of an affecting body's effect on the affected (p. 24). Massumi introduced the concept with his analysis of Hertha Sturm's (1987) research on audiences' emotional responses to media texts. In Sturm's study, children watched three versions of the same short film and the researchers measured the children's emotional responses to each version. As Massumi describes it, relatively small changes in the film lead to significantly

different emotional responses by the audience. The stronger or weaker the response, the greater or lesser affective intensity the text contained. Massumi's work suggests media images act on us in nonconscious ways, not at the level of ideological persuasion as the hypodermic needle model suggests, but at the level of affect. Media texts affect us before we ever have the chance to qualify our reactions into the narrative of emotions. Media, in this conceptualization, is a powerfully affective body.

In some ways, intimacy is a means of communication between bodies; intimacy colours the affects experienced by the encountered bodies. As a communicative form, intimacy is inherently aspirational, pushing towards "something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way" (Berlant, 1998, p. 281). Like affect, intimacy exists on a spectrum, and the aspirations intimacy drives towards changes with its depth and intensity. Intimacy is also a relational process, where repeated interactions with a thing produces "something" which a person may come to "depend on for living" (284–285). In turn, the loss of intimacy is a devastating experience. In this way, intimacy becomes deeply connected with conceptualization of a good life. One cannot live well if they live without intimacy.

Intimacy is also entangled with the public-private divide. Intimacy is often conceptualized as belonging to the private (and therefore feminine) sphere and any intimacies that bleed into the public are therefore transgressive and shameful. Societal perceptions of public intimacy have evolved over time, however. Social media has helped push this shift as it "emphasizes and facilitates intimate practices and connections" in the most public forums imaginable (Raun, 2018, p. 106). This shift in conceptualizations of intimacy normalizes public intimacy, rendering it less (though not entirely) transgressive. As public intimacy is increasingly

normalized, so too are users' deep relationships with influencers. Intimate relationships with virtual influencers, however, remain transgressive in some circles.

Manufacturing Intimacies

Anecdotally, the people I have spoken with find it hard to understand how others develop intimate relationships with virtual influencers. Social media users are aware, even if tacitly (and increasingly explicitly as terms like 'parasocial relationships' become part of the popular lexicon), that human influencers seek to cultivate the perception of intimacy between their selves and their followers and that influencers may present their selves in ways that are not entirely truthful to do so. Likewise, if virtual influencers are to be successful, they too must achieve this perception of intimacy with their followers, even if building that kind of affective relationship with a fictional character may feel unintuitive to many.

Discussing affective and intimate virtual influencer-follower relationships is difficult in part because of the inherent impossibility of knowing affect outside of firsthand experiences (Hillis et al., 2015, p. 12). Further, as Lauren Berlant (1998) noted, intimacies that do not conform to a monogamous romantic relationship, or the nuclear family (as well as intimacies that are too public) can seem "unimaginable," even to the individuals involved in them (p. 286). Research on virtual influencers finds Berlant's statement to be true for their followers as well. Abhinav Choudhry et al.'s 2022 study exploring the reasons why Instagram users interact with virtual influencers is aptly titled "I Felt a Little Crazy Following a 'Doll,'" quoting a study participant who struggled to understand their own relationship with the virtual influencers they follow. While the authors of this study do not follow up on this statement, it makes it clear that relationships with virtual influencers do not fall within the broadly accepted "story" of intimacy (Berlant, p. 281). As such, it comes as little surprise that theorizing on virtual influencer-follower

relationships to this point has avoided questions of intimacy, instead taking a market-driven focus (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Choudhry et al., 2022; Thomas & Fowler, 2021; Zalake et al., 2021).

Relatable Robots

There are, however, characteristics of online life that have set the stage for these kinds of relationships. Among them is the relatability genre of memes and other online content. Akane Kania (2019) describes this genre of online content as largely female-oriented, where social media users "produce an account of personal experience that assumes generality, and plausibly but pleasingly reflects this audience's experience in particular way" (p. 4). Even if the poster and the reader do not know each other, the relatability of the content produces a feeling of connection and community between the poster and the social media users who see the post. Often, this relatability comes from shared feelings of failure to achieve feminine perfection while attempting to remaining within reasonable proximity to it.

This, of course, presumes a shared understanding of what the feminine ideal is, and the ways individuals perceive their failure to live up to it. Creators make relatable content with a specific audience in mind, a "spectatorial girlfriend" who has a "shared knowledge of feminine popular culture, rules, conduct and sociality" with the poster and the poster's other followers. Relatable content calls on and reinforces a "normative sameness" of white, middle-class femininity, using this as a framework for developing affective relationships between the creator and their followers (Kanai, 2019, p. 6).

Online creators forge a brand of relatability by appealing to the spectatorial girlfriend and a socially constructed feminine normativity. Creating content that pulls from a shared feminine knowledge means followers can find the content relatable even if they have not had the same

"literal experience." Instead, the follower only needs to "be both literate in the same sorts of feelings, and *feel* the self into the same affective position" (Kanai, 2019, p. 133, italics in original). By creating content that is sufficiently general and attached to the shared knowledge the creator becomes "affectively representative of others" (p. 126).

However, the creator must not come across too broad. Content that is overly general comes across as a "desperate" means of attention seeking and will turn off followers (Kanai, 2019, p. 141). Instead, creators need to show some amount of individualism, and content should be specific enough to the creator for some of their own personality to show through. Relatable content should also present some form of resistance to normative femininity, as users see trying too hard to conform as unrelatable and undesirable (p. 36). The creator should present not only as someone followers *do* relate to but also as someone they "would *want* to relate to" via a low effort, approximate adherence to normative white middle class femininity (p. 126, italics in original).

Crystal Abidin (2012) noticed Singaporean blogshop models (young women who model and sell clothing via blogs) use similar strategies. While these models use displays of luxurious lifestyles to help make their products seem more attractive to readers, they simultaneously stress their "commonness in order to maintain readers' identification with them" (p. 472). By discussing their struggles with day-to-day tasks and avoiding the use of fashion magazine-style photo editing, blogshop models seem relatable to their readers. By presenting as relatable, the model effectively reduces the importance of the class difference between herself and her readers. Instead of seeming alienating to a middle-class readership, the model's elevated class becomes something to aspire to, and readers identify with the generalized desire to improve their social class and economic standing. The model then monetizes the readers desire to be more like her by

selling them her wardrobe, encouraging readers to believe that mimicry of the model's self-presentation practices is the first step towards rising to her societal position.

While strategies like those used by relatable content creators and blogshop models can help influencers create a relatable online persona, they are not foolproof tactics. Failing to seem relatable can have strong negative effects on an influencer's business, and influencers may struggle to identify the line between seeming relatable and not before they have already crossed it. Often, simply self-identifying as an influencer (i.e., acknowledging their industry job title) is enough to generate "criticism or mockery" (Duffy & Sawey, 2021, p. 137). In some cases, taking brand deals or sponsorships at all renders an influencer unrelatable to their followers (Dunn, 2015).

This is all to say that characters like Miquela can be both fictional and relatable to followers at once. Human influencers are already fictionalizing their lives and using specific experiences to appeal to a broad audience. Virtual influencers can do that too. Believable and relatable characters are one of the components which elevate many of the best fictional stories above their mediocre peers. Writers are constantly playing with, into, and against the conventions of their chosen medium and genre in ways designed to create affective characters. Miquela's team, I argue, is doing that here too, adopting the stylings of the 'relatable' genre of social media content and reworking it to fit Miquela's character.

Figure 3

Love Plots

Note. Miquela and her human boyfriend Nick are seated at a café, extending the ongoing romance plot played out through her social media content. Instagram screenshot.

Take Miquela's Instagram post from 8 June 2022 (Fig. 3). The image shows Miquela sitting on the lap of her ex-boyfriend, Nick. Both hold iced coffees in takeout cups while looking into the camera. The caption reads "Robot, Caffeine and Exes don't mix well… or do they?" The post takes on Miquela's perspective, identifying her as a robot and therefore non-human. Further, Miquela's unnaturally smooth skin, and slightly uncanny appearance also signal her inhuman nature. These features may turn off some social media users while, for others, the post walks the line between remaining general enough to feel relatable while also gesturing towards the specific

individuality of the poster. Miquela's inhuman nature, specific locality and relationship do not subtract from the relatability of knowing when it is a bad idea to go on a coffee date with your ex, but still doing it anyway. Instead, these specifics ensure Miquela's post does not come across as desperate for attention, proving herself to be simultaneously *herself* and a relatable person.

At the same time, the visual qualities of the post play into key aspects of normative femininity. Her make-up look, hairstyle and outfit all signal her ability to present an appropriate and trendy version of adolescent feminine attractiveness. Her racially ambiguous skin tone and features, alongside her slim figure situate her within the specific female beauty standards preferred by Instagram users (Lavrence & Cambre, 2020). Additionally, the contrast of her idealized feminine beauty against Nick's heavily tattooed body positions them as part of the 'hot girl/alt guy' meta of the past few years, contextualizing them within a popular and much discussed stereotype (O'Neill, 2021). The second image in the post tags several of the high-end brands Miquela and Nick are wearing, positing them as aspirational figures with access to trendy luxury goods.

By going on a date with her ex, Miquela admits to a failure of achieving feminine perfection. Instead of moving on to better things, she is falling back on previously failed relationships. By referencing this failure in a tongue-in-cheek way, she shows her followers she both knows what the rules around dating are for young women, and which of those rules she is allowed to break. At the same time, Miquela's adherence to aspirational and normative femininity prevents her from straying too far away from aspirational feminine perfection. All this works together to make Miquela someone users *want* to relate to.

One specific way creators make relatable content, Kanai (2019) says, is through the evocation of the "best friend." Framing a piece of content as a discussion between best friends

creates a simplified situation that is both recognizable and "indefinitely applicable" (p. 131). Followers get to feel like they are seeing the inside of a deep and intimate relationship between two best friends. Alternatively, the followers may be addressed as the best friend, creating a more direct and intimate relationship between influencer and follower. The blogshop models observed by Crystal Abidin and Eric Thompson (2012) used "terms of endearment … as a form of 'girl talk'" (referring to the reader as "sweetie, babe, girl," etc.) when addressing their readers to create a sense of closeness and intimacy (p. 472). Instagram influencers further the best friend narrative by disclosing the kinds of details most often only discussed with close friends like details of their dating life (Figure 3) or pictures of them crying (Figure 4; Abidin, 2015). In either case, the portrayed friendships do not have to reflect the exact reality of followers' offline relationships but must be symbolic of a kind of relationship near enough to followers' that followers can identify with them. Like other kinds of relatable content, best friend posts continue to play into the normative feminine expectations of what aspirational friendship should look like, and the ways they can enhance one's own adherence to those norms:

> The close connections of girlfriendship to normative femininity are clearly seen in both the narrativisation of girlfriendship as a simple, universal and complementary relationship, but also sometimes in the way that the social and heterosexual capital that a best friend may provide is explicitly invoked as part of one's brand. (Kanai, 2019, p. 131)

Miquela's creators use this form of relatability to their advantage, giving her a best friend to play off of in the form of Bermuda (@bermudaiabae). Bermuda is a blonde provocateur, more in line with the brash luxury worship of millennial lifestyle influencers than Miquela's Gen Z cool kid stylings. She appears in Miquela's posts semi-regularly and is one of two other 'robots' connected to Miquela in her fictional canon (the other being her half-brother, Blawko).

Miquela's post from 6 May 2022 is a good example of how the best friend subgenre of relatable content plays out on her feed.

Figure 4

Girl Friends

Note. Miquela and fellow Brud virtual influencer Bermuda celebrate the upcoming release of Miquela's new music. Instagram screenshot.

In Figure 4, Miquela and Bermuda sit next to each other in an upscale bar. Both characters wear trendy and highly feminine night-out looks. The post's caption and comments reveal the occasion for the outing via their shared remembrance of the event.

Miquela: I don't know where I would be without Y'ALL!! My heart was soaring last

night. Love you guys SFM!! 😭 4 more days…

Bermuda: I had to try and make last nights celebration about me and it was EASY with that fit 👸 congrats on the single though bestie!!! 💔😙

Miquela: @bermudaisbae LMAO I CAN'T.

The exchange tells users Miquela and Bermuda were out celebrating the upcoming release of music by Miquela. The two engage in some playful teasing and congratulations, confirming their status as best friends. Followers can identify with the situation—going out with a best friend to celebrate a life achievement, the playful jokes made at the other's expense, and the mutual benefit of increased heterosexual appeal each woman has on the other.

While these explicit displays of friendship allow followers an entry point into Miquela's life, slotting their selves into the role of one friend or the other, it is not the only way Miquela develops intimacy with social media users. Popular influencers have codified key storytelling and content creation techniques which predictably and repeatably illicit feelings of intimacy between their selves and their followers. On social media, intimacy itself has become a genre.

A Recipe for Intimacy

The intimate genre of online content exists as a counterpart to the relatable genre. While relatable content benefits from its generality and ability to tap into the affective properties of shared knowledges and experiences, intimate content is deeply personal. Intimate content centres the 'actual' creator instead of presenting as a vague, reader-insert protagonist. While the creator presents an idealized and simplified persona for easy consumption by followers, the presentation leads social media users to believe they are seeing the 'true' life of the creator (Marwick, 2016, p. 341). Using this first-person, self-centric form of address, influencers communicate "thoughts, feelings and situations that seem (deeply) private and/or transgressive" while simultaneously

"approaching [their] audience as intimate others" (Raun, 2018, p. 105). These characteristics have both become "anticipated by the audience" and endlessly reproducible by influencers (p. 105).

This intimate mode of address is particular to online celebrities, running in opposition to the more safe and reserved ways mainstream celebs present themselves in public (Raun, 2019, p. 104). Raun (borrowing from P David Marshall) used three labels to describe the ways influencers present in their content. The first is the "public self," this is the safest, most brand-friendly presentation and is closest to the way mainstream celebrities present in public. The second is the "public private self," which exposes the more mundane, day-to-day aspects of the influencer's life. The last is the "transgressive private self," where the influencer displays the most vulnerability and shares their most private experiences (p. 106). Influencers working within the intimacy genre predominantly use the latter two forms of self-presentation.

When presenting the public private self, creators address their followers "directly and inclusively as 'you' and 'us,'" and they may look "straight into the camera" as if speaking to the person on the other side of the screen (Raun, 2019, p. 106). Here, Kanai's (2019) spectatorial girlfriend reappears, as the creator speaks to and presents as "available for and interested in conversation with a network of sympathetic (primarily female-identified) others" (p. 106). All of this builds towards the sense of an easy interaction with someone the follower is highly comfortable with and invested enough in to care about their daily (perhaps unexciting) activities.

The transgressive intimate self pushes things further. In this mode of presentation, creators may share images of emotional breakdowns, or details about traumatic experiences. Creators may also discuss or display sexuality and the body in both celebratory and self-critical ways as part of this presentation of self (Raun, 2019, p. 107). Followers do not see this as

oversharing or undesirable behavior, instead using these moments to develop deeply intimate connections with the creator. As Jenny Kennedy (2018) explained, this kind of secret-sharing and personal disclosure is a key component in the development of fulfilling relationships and failing to overshare may signal a lack of dedication or interest in the relationship (p. 271). Just as individuals come to expect oversharing in their offline intimate relationships, so too do they in their online ones.

Raun's exploration of the intimacy genre centres on the beauty and trans activist YouTuber, Julie Van Vu. YouTube videos are significantly different from the still images posted to Instagram. A video's sometimes significant length, and extended opportunities for vocally addressing one's followers, may make them more powerfully affective than an Instagram post. Regardless, I hold that intimacy as a genre is more closely tied to micro-celebrity practices than to YouTube as a platform. Raun argues as much as well and as such I have applied their framework to Miquela's Instagram content (2019, p. 104).

Miquela's post from 9 February 2022 (Figure 5) is an example of displays of the public private self. In the image she lounges in a park with an unnamed friend. Both women hold popular self-help books and the caption reads, "BRB bettering myself 😬😬😬." Here, Miquela's writers let her followers into her private life to a moderate degree. Miquela takes the follower on a rather ordinary outing. There is no great excitement in this post. It is not exactly a private event, ostensibly anyone could catch a sighting (so to speak) of Miquela and her friend as they lounged in the park. However, the post still signals the meeting as a closed event between Miquela, her friend and 'you' the follower. Further, followers get a peek into Miquela's media habits (at the risk of being overly broad I would argue that bonding over shared media tastes is a

near universal experience among young people), insight into her current state of mind (a desire for self-improvement) and they get to 'meet' of one of Miquela's personal friends.

Figure 5

Private Viewing

Note. Miquela and an unnamed friend read self-help books in a park. Instagram screenshot.

Miquela exhibits the transgressive intimate self as well in some of her Instagram posts. Her 16 March 2022 post (Figure 6) is a simple closeup selfie of her crying. The caption references a previous post where Miquela shared excitement about getting a reading from a psychic. The reading, she says, has gone poorly, with Miquela confessing to her followers that

since she is a robot she “can’t be read.” She goes on to explain how this is a reminder of her inhuman nature, that she is “not one of the real girlies.” It is a confession of feelings of inadequacy and of being other. She contradicts social norms which discourage crying in public and overshares with her followers about her personal struggles. Miquela’s creators designed this affective moment with the intent of deepening the perception of intimacy between Miquela and her followers.

Figure 6

Robo Emotions

Note. Miquela cries while expressing feelings of otherness. Instagram screenshot.

These kinds of transgressive intimate displays have not always been successful for Miquela. In 2019 the digital model received backlash for a YouTube video posted to her channel that described her experience with sexual assault. Viewers criticized her for "co-opting very real stories" for the sake of increasing her relatability to followers (Song, 2019). It is unclear to what extent an ongoing history of demeaning women for sharing their experiences with sexual assault fuelled this controversy, and to what degree followers simply and reasonably found the use of survivors' stories for the sake of marketing distasteful. Either way, this controversy shows there is a limit to how transgressive Miquela's content can be before it ceases to be a generator of intimacy between her and her followers and begins to alienate social media users instead.

What does not seem to be alienating to followers, however, is Miquela's purely digital nature. Avatars have a long history as representatives of human users, and over time have become affective symbols in their own right.

Intimate Avatars

In Ken Hillis' 2015 essay "The Avatar and Online Affect" Hillis describes some of the key phenomena that make avatars affective for the people that interact with them. Hillis is largely concerned with user-controlled avatars in highly social multiplayer online videogames like *World of Warcraft* (p. 75). In these spaces, Hillis argues players experience telepresence, "the phenomenological experience of presence at a distance" (p. 78). Players experience the game as allegory, putting themselves in the place of the avatar and experiencing the game world through the avatar's perspective (p. 77).

As players embrace the ascribed role of their own avatar, they likewise recognize the parallel experience of other players. Players, through the perspective of their avatars, come to see other players' avatars as both representation of that player, and as sign of human activity (Hillis,

2015, p. 79). The avatar transcends the status of a mere sign by simultaneously revealing the necessarily human actions required for the avatar's *liveliness*.

Hillis further develops his argument by bringing in Deleuze's theory of the movement-image. For Deleuze, Hillis tells us, movement is a key indicator of life. Part of how we distinguish signs from their real-world referents is by their lack of movement. Thus, by placing images in motion, media like cinema meld "experiential reality" with "physical reality," allowing viewers to read moving images as "identical" to the material world (2015, p. 80–81). Extending these ideas to videogame avatars, Hillis argues the ability to move allows avatars to further break down the barriers between sign and referent.

How far Hillis' work goes towards describing what makes virtual influencers affective is debatable. There are key differences between player-avatars in online games, and virtual influencers' Instagram profiles which means that some of Hillis' theories do not map exactly. First is the problem of telepresence. Social media platforms are mechanically and visually different experiences from online multiplayer videogames. While the common metaphor of social media sites as 'platforms' positions them as shared digital spaces for those that use them, the experience is not directly analogous to the shared worlds of multiplayer games. We spend time *in* games, and time *on* social media. While interactions can happen in real-time between social media users via things like direct messaging, and back and forth comment discussion, communication also often happens asynchronously. This is a far cry from the instantaneous interactions allowed by the voice chat features many online games have (though not too distinct from text-based chat options). Despite this, users still conceptualize social media as a place where they come to share their lives with people they care about. Social media leverages networked visual communications to allow users to connect with each other over distances in

ways they may not be able to otherwise. For many users, experiences become real when posted online (think breakup announcements, pregnancy reveals, and fitness progression posts). By participating in social media, virtual influencers place themselves within a shared digital space that many users view as extensions of their embodied offline lives. Virtual influencers are present insofar as they exist within the real world of social media.

Movement is perhaps the easiest piece of Hillis' theories to map onto virtual influencers. While virtual influencers hold the still image as their foundational media, this has been changing in recent years. Lil Miquela's TikTok following now exceeds her following on Instagram (3.6 million compared to 2.9 million), and this phenomenon is true for other top virtual influencers like Lu do Magalu (6.9 million versus 6.1 million) and Guggimon (2.3 million versus 1.5 million). As TikTok has grown in popularity, so too has marketing embraced the platform and video-based content by virtual influencer creators along with it (Enberg, 2022). Virtual influencers are now characters in motion, allowing them to seem a little closer to material objects.

There is also the notion of movement across platforms at play. As virtual influencers begin to occupy space in more online places, the more tangible they become. Their ability to move from Instagram to TikTok to Twitter reflects the many and divergent ways human users move across online spaces. Just like many of their followers, virtual influencers are not localized to a particular online space and share slightly different aspects of their personalities in different places while playing with the cultural expectations of these spaces.

Perhaps the biggest inconsistency between the player-avatars Hillis examined and virtual influencers is the lack of a single human behind the avatar. Characters like Lil Miquela are corporately controlled entities, scripted and managed by teams of writers and marketers. There is

no lone author behind the scenes to accredit the avatar too. Miquela does not point to a person playing a game interacting with others online, as much as she gestures toward the capitalistic interests of her creators. While Miquela does not represent a single human user in the way other digital avatars do, human users are still likely to read her as such. Related phenomena like VTubers—YouTube personalities who use motion capture technologies to map digital avatars over their physical person while performing in-character for their videos—are often the creation of, or at the very least, performed by single individuals. VTubers are similar enough to virtual influencers that some users may see them as essentially the same, assuming that there is a singular human behind Miquela as well. Even without a knowledge of VTubers, users' tacit association between real humans and digital avatars is strong enough that Miquela's mere existence as a digital avatar gives the impression that she represents an individual somewhere, reifying her affective powers.

Even given a general association between digital avatars and human users, not all users will conceptualize Miquela as the representative of a single human user. First, users with less gaming experience may fail to make the connection between avatars and human users at all. The ubiquity of videogames in contemporary culture makes total ignorance of the phenomenon unlikely, but Miquela's affective pull may vary depending on the user's specific gaming experience (Andersson & Sobek, 2020, p. 20). Second, social media users who are aware of who owns Miquela and how they operate her may actively resist developing affective relationships with her in the first place.

In sum, Miquela's success as an influencer relies on her creators' ability to make her an affective character. A deep history of digital avatars as user-proxies in highly social worlds, and the employment of well-known social media content genres help them achieve this goal.

Ultimately, the staying power of virtual influencers, and their lasting impact on the influencer industry is not clear. However, given potential futures where we interact with one another in increasingly digitally mediated ways, the seemingly clear distinction between so-called real humans and wholly fictional characters will begin to fade. Bringing virtual influencers to life will always require human workers, however, even when social media users are prevented from seeing them. The closed-off nature of the virtual influencer industry makes it difficult to know what the experience of making virtual influencers is like for workers, but the information we do have on associated industries gives us a good starting place for exploring this question.

Chapter 5

Future Exploitations: Speculative Labour Conditions of the Virtual Influencer Industry

The previous two chapters of my thesis explored the labour of influencers. Chapter Three explored the regulation and exploitation of influencer labour. That chapter discussed the by now well understood systems that leave online creators beholden to both the social media platforms they publish on and the advertisers who employ them. There, I made the case that while influencers remain a highly exploitable form of labour, things may be changing. The most popular influencers offer a real threat to the dominance of the traditional advertising agencies and brands, pushing advertisers to consolidate the remaining power they do have. Simultaneously, the increasing risk of public backlash for being associated with problematic influencers has pushed advertisers to work with only the most brand safe and predictable creators for their campaigns. These twin conditions have given rise to the virtual influencer, the ultimately exploitable social media spokesperson offering advertisers prefect control over brand messaging and safety.

In Chapter Four I explored how virtual influencers become viable replacements to their human counterparts by fostering the kinds of intimate relationships social media users have with existing human influencers. In effect, virtual influencers must be able to replicate the affective labour performed by human influencers. Since the emergence of the contemporary lifestyle influencer some ten years ago, the kinds of content they produce has become increasingly codified as genre. Becoming a genre makes intimacy-generating influencer content replicable, reducing intimacy to a set of core elements easily repeated and remixed by other content creators looking to capitalize on the genre's popularity. Virtual influencer creators, like Brud, use these key genre elements when scripting posts for Lil Miquela and other virtual influencers. The resulting content may not be a perfect facsimile of influencer content, but Miquela's posts come

close enough. Miquela's reasonable similarity to human influencers allows her to foster intimate relationships with her followers and act as an effective product endorser.

This chapter puts the topics of the previous two in conversation, helping to answer my third research question: who are the new workers under the shift in labour from human influencers to virtual influencer creators, and what forms of labour exploitation apply to them? I argue that, more than anything, transitioning from human influencers to virtual influencers means a change in workforce. Brands and advertisers shift from working with individual spokespeople/influencers (or their representatives) and managing the complications that come with that, to working with animators, software developers, community managers and other digital labourers whose work remains largely obscured by the virtual influencers they create and maintain. This transition means a turn away from one exploited class of worker to another—a transition to a class of worker that is easier to hide from users' view, and one that has much less reach, voice, or means to change their material position.

I should note that any inference of the exploitation of virtual influencer workers is speculative. To date, there appears to be no direct research on the labour conditions and practices at virtual influencer companies like Brud, nor have there been any major exposes or exploration of these workplaces by reputable news organizations. To some extent, this is by design. Brud and their competitors remain tight-lipped about their operations. It is also likely they have strong non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) in place, which are popular among Silicon Valley companies in general, and effectively prevent employees from discussing the conditions of their labour (Woodcock, 2019, p. 63). Without direct access to the virtual influencer companies, or academic literature about it, I rely on research conducted on associated industries. Namely, I am using literature on the history and analysis of labour in the animation and videogames industries, and

social media community management. It is my estimate that these three areas of labour are likely to have the most overlap with the experiences of virtual influencer creators and managers. This was a difficult choice to make, as the limited access we have to virtual influencer companies means we have little knowledge about how they create characters like Miquela or others, nor the management structure or styles of these companies. What we do know for certain, is that Miquela is *not* artificial intelligence.

Miquela's Instagram bio may say she is a "19-year-old robot," but that is not the whole truth (Miquela, n.d.). Within Miquela's story world she is a sentient robot, attempting to live the life of an average SoCal girl on the cusp of adulthood seeking fame online. This causes some confusion among her followers about what Miquela *actually* is. Most are not under the illusion that she exists as an actual person (or physical robot) out in the world, but some do mistake her for something akin to a chatbot or other automated digital process. To be a robot Miquela would have to be able to perform automated actions; when followers comment on her posts, a computer somewhere would have to reply automatically; when her creators schedule a post a machine would have to develop the images and captions and publish the post mostly without human input. Miquela is not a robot, however, and is currently incapable of conducting any tasks automatically. This is not to say that companies do not have designs of fully automating virtual influencer content, but that the technology required to do so is not there yet (Alexander, 2019; Thomas & Fowler, 2021, p. 20)

While Miquela is not truly a robot, her presentation as such benefits her owners nonetheless. Suggesting she is a piece of technology that can act on her own, at least to some degree, obscures the team of real humans working behind her. Miquela's owners encourage followers not to think too much about the labour involved in making her and her content. Brud

give no indication of how many people it takes, or how many hours they work, to maintain a character like Miquela. At best, followers are to think of her as the creative manifestation of a singular creator, playing on our susceptibility to the lone creator myth and the conception of digital avatars as a representation of singular individuals (see Chapter Four this thesis). Choose any of Miquela's Instagram posts, it will not take you long to find users asking, 'who are you, *really*' and yet others responding with 'she's a robot, *of course*.'

Instead of being a robot or public-facing persona of a lone creative, Miquela is a team effort, propped up by a staff of creatives who make the content and marketers who make the sales. Reports of how other people have gone about creating their own virtual influencers gives us the best indication of how Miquela's content gets created. A video from fashion blog *The Cut* documents the publication's attempts to recreate Miquela using the 3D design software Fuse and Cinema 4D. Here, they build a new 3D model on top of a reference image of Miquela, which the artist poses and superimposes onto a background image of an empty city street (New York Magazine, 2018). Wendy Lawn, writing for *Container Magazine* (2021) described a similar method for developing her own virtual influencer, Evie:

> Using a suite of character creation and animation tools, artificial intelligence-driven software processed the photo of a human, Ashleigh, and rendered her on to a humanoid 3D character model. Further sculpting and customisation was applied. The character creation and animation software generated a fully-rigged character that can be clothed and animated using facial gesture tools, text-to-speech, and lip-sync technology. (Lawn, 2021)

Figure 7

The Cut's Miquela Clone

Note. YouTube screenshot.

Figure 8

Wendy Lawn's Evie

Note. Downloaded from *Container Magazine.*

It is worth noting that while Lawn does discuss the use AI technologies she only uses them to help her create a manipulable 3D character model and not for the automated generation of posts, publishing, or follower engagement. Even in image creation, AI will only help alleviate some of the labour required by the artist and 3D modelling remains a labour-intensive task (Mihailova, 2016).

In general, AI technologies are rarely as hands-off or removed from human intervention as the tech companies that develop, promote, and use them want us to believe (Roberts, 2021, p. 51). Still, these firms stand to benefit from making AI seem more autonomous and automated than it really is. If tech companies, social media platforms and so on can convince their users and regulators that AI is responsible for things like content moderation executives can claim a certain

amount of protection from responsibility. If something goes wrong it is because the AI made the wrong decision, not the company's leadership, though in reality humans design these AI systems, choose the data they are trained on, and decide what kinds of work they perform (p. 58). Second, and more importantly to this conversation, invoking AI helps companies obscure their labour force (Sadowski, 2018). Claiming AI performs certain tasks helps tech companies hide human labour from view. Regardless of how many people it takes to do a job, if a company can convince regulators and users that AI 'actually' does the work then the real humans behind the scenes become invisible and more suspectable to the kinds of exploitations I will discuss throughout this chapter; job precarity, low wages, alienation, and so on.

Circling back to the creation of virtual influencers, when compared to *The Cut*'s clone (Figure 7) and Wendy Lawn's Evie character (Figure 8), Miquela appears much more realistic. Higher labour input from Brud's artists and differences in character creation methods are likely the cause of Miquela's increased realism. Miquela's sophisticated presentation may also be a product of being only partially animated. Things like the life-like texture and drape of her clothing, as well as her easy existence alongside fleshy people in her posts suggests there is a human model acting as Miquela, at least some of the time. Instead of inserting an entirely digital character into a real scene, a team photographs a human model, animating Miquela's face on top of the image after the fact. If this is so, the scope of labour behind a character like Miquela expands well beyond the behind-the-screen jobs of digital animators and social media community managers. There are now models, likely several, who 'play' Miquela (perhaps actor is a better descriptor of the work they do), stylists who dress the models, photographers who shoot them, location scouts that plan the shoots, and editors that tweak the image long before a 3D artist inserts Miquela as we know her into the final image. This understanding of how Brud

creates Miquela expands the range of labour well outside of the bound that I can meaningfully analyse in this thesis. As such, taking the lead from Kylie Jarrett (2022) and Melissa Gregg (2011), the following sections of this chapter will focus on those most likely to be "formal employees" who are working "more or less full-time, or on an ongoing basis" with the acknowledgement that these workers may not be the most exploited but remain the most underrepresented in the literature concerning workers in the tech industry (Jarrett, p. 25). I want to begin by discussing the labour conditions of digital animators. First, because they seem to be the workers most obviously involved with the creation of Miquela—she does not get into any of her photos if an artist does not draw her in after all. Second, because the animation industry is the only industry examined in this chapter that pre-dates the digital age. This history means we can see how animators have addressed labour struggles over a longer period, providing some context for how labour issues in the creative industries have evolved over time. I will begin with a brief history of animator's unionization efforts throughout the mid-Twentieth century.

Animation Industry

The animation industry's labour movement began in earnest in 1937, when animators at Fleischer Studios in New York kicked off a strike lasting more than five months (Deneroff, 1987). By the end of it, the Fleischer animators had won labour rights like a forty-hour work week, paid sick days and vacation time, and union representation. These successes in the American East eventually convinced Hollywood animators to push for similar benefits, with major studios like Warner Brothers agreeing to the labour standards set out by the newly launched Screen Cartoonist's Guild in the following years (Friedman, 2022, p. 107). Disney was among the last of the major studios to grant Fleischer-like rights to their workers and resisted the

labour movement as long as they could. However, the US National Labour Relations Board finally forced Disney to follow suit in July 1941 (p. 234).

Even with the major animation studios on board, labour improvements did not come to everyone in the industry. Taylorism, the practice of breaking down production into a hierarchy of labour where "simpler actions [were] to be performed by less-skilled, cheaper, more replaceable employees," had already become a well-entrenched practice in animation production (Stahl, 2010, p. 277). This meant that 'low-skilled' workers were often divorced entirely from the creative decision-making process, and instead hired by studios to fill ungratifying and low-waged work like tracing. In many cases, studios drew these job divisions across gender lines, with women relegated to the most tedious jobs required of assembly line animation, and men elevated to the more glamours realm of conceptual work. Alla Gadassik (2021) argues these labour division represent an overall feminization of non-conceptual work in the creative industries. Feminized labour is work that requires employees to embody traditionally understood feminine qualities, like "caring sociability, entrepreneurialism, flexibility, and adaptability," while simultaneously accepting shaky job security, low wages, and minimal opportunities for upward mobility (Gadassick, p. 54; Jarrett, 2022, p. 156). Feminized labor is therefore not only work done by women, but also that which contains the attributes most associated with labour typically performed by women. Women frustrated by the unfulfilling and tedious labour handed to them by the big animation studios turned towards independent animation work throughout 70s and 80s. While this shift allowed women the opportunity to choose the creative direction of their work more freely, it also came with higher precarity. No longer able to rely on the steady and predictable income of studio jobs, these animators became reliant on the financial support of

friends, family, freelance gigs, and artists grants to continue their work and provide for their families.

As Gadassick states, the conditions these animators worked under have become the norm in today's animation industry, where studios rely on "outsourced and contingent labour" while offering exceedingly few permeant staff jobs. Industry changes like the advent of digital animation have pushed the feminization of animation even further, as digital creation tools allow studios to employ workforces that require no "physical proximity to one another as long as an infrastructure of secure data transmission is in place" (p. 56). Taylorism remains strong in the industry as well, and most animators are highly alienated from the products they create and given no real opportunity to insert their own voice into their work. The industry's reliance of offshoring and increasing use of low-cost labourers in places like Asia has only accelerated trends of worker alienation and labour feminization (Stahl, 2010, p. 280). The working conditions of animators in the Global North have become entirely untenable, reflecting the reality of labour in the cultural industries more broadly. I will return to this topic below.

One area of animation work that seems particularly relevant to our conversation on the development of Lil Miquela is that of motion and performance capture animators. If we understand Miquela as a face superimposed on to the image of a real human body, it is animators trained in motion and performance capture work that are creating Miquela's digital face. Motion capture is the use of specialized technology that allows animators to use live action footage as a reference for computer animation. Performance capture makes use of more sophisticated technologies that also allow for the digitization of an actor's facial expressions. These technologies have become increasingly popular in the development of blockbuster film and videogame development. In either case, studios task animator with creating a digital character

and animating it to the movement of the reference material. While the software allows for some automation, the process still requires a high level of labour and skill by the animators who produce the final image audiences see on screen (Mihailova, 2016, p. 41). Motion and performance capture animators are both more susceptible to job precarity then other animators (due to their non-inclusion in the Animation Guild or other unions), and simultaneously face increased alienation from their creative production and the reduced valuation of their skills (p. 43). Especially in Hollywood, these workers are frequently framed as performing "supplementary" work, which compliments the performance of the actor doing the reference performance (p. 44). Framing motion and performance capture animators as supplementary excludes them from any ownership over the characters they create, while the authoritative voice of the character is handed over to the actors. This puts the animators in a position where they are at once essential for bringing to the director's vision to life and yet, not allowed ownership of the character's on-screen performance. In this way, creative decision-makers alienate animators from the conceptual process on two fronts. First, by controlling what and how the animators create. Second, by denying animators ownership over any creative achievements won through the inherently interpretive and creative process of animating on top of reference materials.

The animators creating Miquela and other virtual influencers are likely to be similarly alienated from their production and under-valued by their employers. Instead of representing a new form of animation work, virtual influencer creation is a relocation of long practiced forms of labour exploitation. We tend to think about the most famous and wealthy individuals in art and technology—directors, CEOs, and painters who have their works auctioned at Christie's—but low-waged and precariously employed workers do much of the actual labour. Big name artists like Damien Hirst rely on large teams of precariously employed workers to mass produce their

art (Shaw & de Silva, 2021), and the employees who do the manual labour of scanning and digitizing books at Google do not receive the employment benefits offerd to their higher paid colleagues (Mallonee, 2019). Further, while this section has focused on Hollywood's animation industry, I should note that studios outsource and offshore a significant amount of animation work (Tschang & Goldstein, 2004). Outsourcing work allows studios to skirt domestic labour laws and further reduce their labour costs. This creates a vicious cycle where improved labour standards incentivise offshoring which in turn creates more precarity for domestic workers. The point being that even if labour conditions for virtual influencer animators exceed industry standards, there are reasons to believe that will not last. Certainly, if we look to other industries where animators are employed, such as videogames development, we can see that a change of scenery has not come with improvements for labour standards.

Games Industry

Games companies have put a lot of effort into obscuring the labour conditions their workers experience. The games industry has achieved this in part by mandating employees sign strictly enforced non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and non-compete agreements (Woodcock, 2019, p. 63). Stiff competition motivates games companies to remain highly secretive about in-development titles and any proprietary technologies used in making them. While in theory NDAs allow companies to hold on to their trade secrets, potentially giving them an edge over the competition, they also give employers broad control over labourers' career trajectories. Overtime, companies have pushed the definition of trade secret to include general industry knowledge, "in effect preventing an employee from leaving their employer and continuing to work in the same field" (Lobel, 2018). Even when legally permitted to take up work with another employer, NDAs can still prevent workers from using techniques, information, processes,

technologies, and other innovations in their new roles regardless of how involved they were in the creation of those innovations. This, of course, has a chilling effect on competition, where companies afraid of losing their competitive edge prevent skilled workers from exploring other opportunities or participating in the development of the industry more broadly. NDAs may also stifle creativity within a specific organization as well, as the agreements can prevent workers from discussing projects across departments or consulting with other teams, restricting their ability to collaborate with colleagues who could offer important insights and new perspectives. Craig Ehrlich and Leslie Garbarino (2019) have argued that California's ban on non-compete agreements (i.e., agreements that prevent employees from taking up jobs with competing companies) have helped create Silicon Valley's reputation as a hub for technological innovation as it allowed for the free flow of ideas and collaboration across the entire tech industry (p. 291).

While not strictly speaking the same thing, NDAs and non-competes are broadly comparable as legal methods for preventing laborers from discussing their work. Where NDAs differ significantly from non-compete agreements is in their broader definition of what they prevent workers from discussing. As Vasundhara Prasad (2018) explained, powerful individuals have long used NDAs as a means of protection against consequences for abusing their subordinates (p. 2518). Powerful abusers often encourage victims threatening legal action to sign NDAs in exchange for an out-of-court settlement, arguing that taking the issue to court would only make matters worse for the victim and that the abuser's higher status and greater access to legal supports would push the case in their favour anyway. While the systematic use of NDAs can help powerful individuals protect their selves from the consequences of their actions after the fact, many tech companies take things one step further by demanding workers sign NDAs pre-emptively. As *The New York Times* reporter Shira Ovide (2021) stated, tech companies often

require people to sign an NDA before they can so much as set foot inside the company offices. These agreements can limit a person's ability to talk about topics ranging well outside of the realm of trade secrets. It is logical to assume the agreements companies require employees to sign make much the same demands, except for workers this means a prohibition on discussing their work lives in totality. Non-disparagement agreements further strengthen these conditions by preventing workers from saying anything negative or critical about their employers (Ponte, 2016; Weston, 2021).

For videogames workers, the undiscussable portion of their lives may extend far beyond the traditional 40-hour work week. One of the games industry's most talked about labour concerns is crunch. Crunch describes periods of excessive and unpaid overtime. This happens most often when games need to meet key development deadlines, though at some studios consistent unpaid overtime is "a taken-for-granted part of the job" (Cote & Harris, 2021, p 162). While crunch has never "been proven to be an effective managerial strategy" it has nonetheless become a de facto part of scheduling games production. Instead of making a game better, it merely makes it cheaper to produce. Cunch as creates "false expectations" for turnaround time, as bosses insist on finishing products within a timespan that could never be achieved if workers were constrained to the conventional 40-hour work week (Woodcock, 2019, p. 82).

Taken together, non-disclosure/disparagement and non-compete agreements create a legal minefield for games workers, leaving them with few ways to speak out about their day-to-day work life without risking legal ramifications and career suicide. Despite this, workers have found ways to make their voices heard. In recent years, games workers have taken to social media platforms and job-posting sites to discuss their labour conditions in semi-anonymity (Bergstrom, 2022). At the same time the International Game Developers Association (IGDA)

annual industry survey has centred quality of life and job satisfaction issues, giving games workers around the world a means to speak collectively. Finally, rigorous industry ethnographies, such as Ergin Bulut's (2020) and Casey O'Donnell's (2014), provide some of the most in-depth looks at games workers' labour experiences we have access to.

However, the most impactful publications on the videogames industry's labour conditions have come from games workers directly. In 2004 a blog post authored by the then anonymous EA Spouse (later revealed to be game developer Erin Hoffman) brought the excessive and uncompensated overtime experienced by games workers to mainstream attention (Dyer-Witheford, 2006). Hoffman's post was widely coved in the games media, and spurred on two lawsuits which paid out nearly US$30 million in unpaid overtime to games workers. Despite the lawsuits and the continued discussion about crunch in the games industry, crunch persists to this day (Woodcock, 2019, p. 80–81). The IGDA's most recently published *Developer Satisfaction Survey* found that most games workers continue to experience crunch:

> Many respondents still experience long hours. Across all respondents, one-third said their job involved crunch time and a further 22% said that their job required periods of long hours, extended work hours, or extended overtime, but they just didn't call it crunch. (International Game Developers Association, 2021, p. 21).

While these stats show the amount of crunch games workers experience has fallen, (down from 51 percent found in the IGDA's 2017 survey [2018, p. 23]) the numbers remain high. It is also worth considering how much of this change in reported crunch time is an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the generalized shift from in-office to at-home work. The changes to the structures of work brought about by the pandemic have likely exacerbated the effects of presence bleed. For Melissa Gregg (2011), presence bleed is the "experience whereby the location and

time of work becomes secondary" to an ever-increasing task list with no foreseeable completion (p. 2). Working from home already collapses the distinction between work and personal life, and when shelter-in-place orders mean you no longer leave the place where you live/work, work threatens to become all-encompassing, potentially pushing workers to redefine what they understand as excessive working hours. Additionally, the lockdowns proved to be a boon to the videogames industry en masse. According to videogame industry market research firm Newzoo (Wijman, 2021), the games industry generated some US$180 billion in 2021, a 1.4 percent increase over 2020's already impressive US$160 billion in revenues, itself a more than nine percent year-on-year increase over 2019's revenues (Newzoo, 2020, p. 14). Studios seeking to suck up some of the new money that is sloshing around the industry may be incentivised to increase crunch time for their workers as they push to develop the next big hit.

The use of crunch to tighten timelines and reduced production costs is highly associated with the financialization of the videogames industry. As the videogames industry has become increasingly consolidated (Conditt, 2022), individual studios have less and less autonomy over their workforce. Subsidiary studios must now answer to their parent company's shareholders, who demand a strong overall bottom line across the portfolio and may not consider the successes of individual studios. The level of revenues that would have been enough to float the studio as an indie player may not be enough to satisfy their new owners, and failure to meet expectations (even if the studio nets a profit) will mean staff cuts or the wholesale closure of the studio. To further this point, games studios have taken up the general tech industry trend of offering stock options as an employee benefit. For employers, giving stock options to workers yield two major benefits. First, it is a tactic that encourages workers to appeal to the stock market directly and creates a "form of social bond" to the parent company's overall revenues (Bulut, 2020, p. 5).

Second, it encourages workers to accept lower wages in the present in exchange for the potential of financial rewards in the future—assuming the company grows accordingly (Jarrett, 2022, p. 58). This creates a vicious cycle where workers willingly accept overwork and underpayment because they believe (*or simply hope*) their suffering now will lead to gains in the future, with increased productivity in the present as the only way to ensure those future gains.

Games workers, at least at established studios, may not participate in aspirational labour as Brooke Erin Duffy (2018) describes it, but videogames remain a passion driven industry. Like all creative industries, a love of the craft and excitement about working in a medium they adore drives game developers (Bulut, 2020, p. 25). That passion imbues the games industry with a certain cool status, and therefore an excess of people vying to enter the workforce. Couple that with the industry's intense Taylorism and every worker becomes easily replaceable (Woodcock, 2019, p. 76).

One key area where the videogame industry overlaps with social media work is in community management. Community managers are the people who manage a brand's officially run forums, Discord servers, social media pages, and other online community spaces. Community management has become an increasingly integral part of a game's long-term success (Woodcock, 2019, p. 17), brands' social media strategies (Miliopoulou, 2021), and influencer practices. It is these workers whom I will discuss next.

Community Management

Community managers are not a well-defined group of workers in the existing literature. There are two key industries that employ community managers: the videogames industry, and social media marketing agencies (deWinter et al., 2017, p. 37; Miliopoulou, 2021, p. 3130), with differing job expectations between these two categories. In the advertising industry, community

managers have relatively limited roles and are responsible for posting social media content and responding to comments and messages from users (Miliopoulou, p. 3141). Autonomy for these workers is low. Social media managers handle the big picture content planning and scheduling, and content creation is handed off to the agency's creative teams (p. 3138). Community managers may work on several brand accounts across various platforms and report on the "reach and visibility" of different posts to the planning teams, but have little to no conceptual role in content creation, planning, or execution (p. 3140).

Community management in the games industry is much more involved. Games community managers have more autonomy than their agency counterparts and are more actively involved with the planning and execution of social media content (Kerr & Kelleher, 2015, p.188). While the exact channels community managers engage with differ depending on the needs of their employer, games marketplace comment sections (such as Steam, the Microsoft Store, GOG, and others) title specific forums, Subreddits, and Discord servers, alongside typical social media platforms like Instagram, and YouTube are all common. The literature suggests community managers may work with the community of one specific title if the user base is big enough or may perform community management for all titles at smaller studios (Kerr & Kelleher, p. 189; deWinter et al., 2017, p. 39).

Ostensibly the role of a community manager is to help facilitate the growth of a brand or game's community, though this is not always the case. While a high level of passion for games culture and previous experience in community organizing are important recruitment requirements for games community managers (deWinter et al., 2017; Kerr & Kelleher, 2015) this is often not so for brand community managers. Here, workers view community management as an entryway to higher paid, and more fulfilling, marketing jobs (Miliopoulou, 2021, p. 3138). In

brand community management the maintenance of brand image supersedes the importance of community building. Encouraging people to interact with each other can lead to conflicts which are time consuming and emotionally difficult for community managers to deal with. Additionally, discussion on social media posts has no measurable effect on immediate sales. These realties mean that community managers prioritise higher post visibility and like counts via the use of eye-catching visuals and attention seeking content over interactions with the brand through shared interest, experiences, and excitement about the products (p. 3139–3141).

One throughline between the two categories of community managers is the emotional labour the position involves. Emotional labour, as described by Arlie Hochschild (1981), is the controlled display of emotions workers must perform as part of their workplace expectations. In jobs requiring high levels of emotional labour, the employer exercises control over the emotions of their workers, telling them how to feel and express emotions in given situations. While the more detached brand community managers may be able to avoid this to an extent since they actively try to limit discussions on the social media pages they manage, games community managers are constantly involved in emotional labour. Community managers describe the ability to both empathize and set boundaries with players as a key to success in the role (deWinter et al., 2017, p. 39). As community managers are often the first point of contact for players with concerns about the games they play, they need to at once engage with players on topics of concern, sort and prioritise the various concerns players have, and translate player complaints into actionable items the development teams can work on (Kerr & Kelleher, 2015, p. 188). Developers may not be receptive to the suggestions community managers bring to them however, and the industry undervalues the work they do (deWinter, p. 42). This, I argue, represents an evolution of Eva Illouz's concept of emotional capitalism (2007). For Illouz,

"emotional capitalism is a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other" (p. 5). Emotions, she tells us, have taken a central role in modernity and tending to worker's emotional state is key to achieving high worker productivity. Emotional capitalism achieves this goal by instrumentalizing emotions, whereby externalizing emotions is the primary method of resolving those emotions. Emotional capitalism manifests itself in the workplace by encouraging managers to empathize with their workforce and allowing workers to air their grievances without reprimand. Emotional capitalism equates listening to doing, suggesting that by empathizing with their workers employers are resolved of the responsibility to instill meaningful workplace changes. Work is not the problem, workers' emotions about work are the problem. Talking about those emotions resolves them, thus the problems those emotions are associated with are resolved along with them. In community management, this strategy extends to the consumer. By giving players a place to discuss their emotions, and an official company representative to empathize with them, the studio resolves itself of the need to act on player concerns. Empathy is the action, change is unnecessary.

As shown, this ability to empathize with community members is a central part of a community manager's job. The ability to empathize with community members in the right ways requires strong emption competence. Emotional competence is a skill favoured by emotional capitalism and describes "the capacity to display an emotional style" which includes both the ability to self-regulate one's emotions and appropriately handle the emotions of others (Illouz, 2007, p. 63). Under emotional capitalism, emotional competence translates into emotional capital. Employers seek out emotional competence as a desirable skill, privileging workers who display this skill for hiring, job advancements, and raises (p. 64–65).

For community managers, high emotional intelligence is table stakes, as they constantly come up against players' emotions. The lack of action on players' product concerns often results in the formation of an irate player-base. Players, increasingly frustrated with the lack of action from developers, take their frustration out on the only official representative they can reliably get in contact with: the community managers. These frustrations may compound with other issues community members have and coalesce with a culture known for being hostile in the first place.

> [Community managers] have to deal with threats of suicide, political arguments, sexism, racism, and homophobia, and [must] know the cultural backgrounds of their players in order not to offend. Hacking and exposure of player data was another challenge and community managers had to manage the communications surrounding these issues. (Kerr & Kelleher, 2015, p. 188).

Community managers typically do not receive training on how to deal with these kinds of high emotion situations (deWinter et al., 2017, p. 39). Instead of providing formal training, employers expect workers to come to the job with previous experience in the area, either through past professional experience or grassroots involvement in games communities (Kerr & Kelleher, p. 185). As one community manager quoted by Jennifer deWinter et al. suggested, "community management is just something you DO, not something you train for" (p. 39, emphasis in original). Community managers are expected to come into the job with the proper emotional competencies and intelligence to handle the often intense emotions of players, while regulating their own emotional states. However, this does not resolve employers of their responsibility to ensure they do not put workers at excessive on-the-job risks. Responsible employers should do two things: first, they should make sure workers are aware of the kinds of taxing emotional labour that comes with community management roles (a fact employers obscure by the

positioning of these roles as early career marketing positions in job ads); and second, they should provide the training and support workers need to sustain their own health and success in the role.

Community managers use tactics like the development of a curated "online persona and writing style" (Kerr & Kelleher, 2015, p. 188) to help them deal with highly emotional interactions with players. The development of this persona may include identity masking when engaging with communities that are hostile towards certain groups of people and choosing to act and present in ways that do not align with the community manager's personal beliefs (p. 189). This method of online self-presentation is similar to the micro-celebrity practices described by Alice Marwick (2016), where internet users build their online popularity by creating an "easily consumable" version of their selves and through direct interaction with fans and followers via comment exchanges, replies, re-sharing of content, and so on (p. 341). The key distinction between community managers and influencers using micro-celebrity practices is in the use of self-disclosure. While sharing personal details is a key to community generation for influencers aiming to build a fanbase around their own self-brand and content, community managers belong to pre-existing communities centred around content that is not directly tied to the identity of the community manager. This means community managers must meet the community where it is, reshaping their own personality to "maintain an apolitical, culturally nuanced subjectivity online that may, or may not, coincide with their offline identity" (Kerr & Kelleher, p. 188). This distinction is likely minimal, however, as influencers are constantly making decisions about what personal information to disclose and how to do so. To make connections with their communities, community managers are likely engaging in self-disclosure to some extent as well, though it may be in a more confined and controlled manner than influencers. Further, community managers may have done much of the relationship building work prior to employment, as many are

"recruited from fan communities and bring their communities with them" to the new job (deWinter, 2017, p. 37).

Another commonality between the two community manager categories is the expectation of unlimited availability and low wages compared to other jobs in their given industry. Aphra Kerr and John Kelleher (2015, p. 187) estimated the annual wages for Irish community managers between €20,000 and €38,000 (approximately C$25,574–48,591) putting them below games testers (€48,928/C$62,564) who are often considered the most precarious workers in the games industry (Bulut, 2015; Dyer-Witheford, 2006, p. 603). Jennifer deWinter et al. found wages for US community managers in 2017 were only slightly higher, coming in at US$51,971 (C$67,489) per annum (p. 40). The comparatively low wages suggest community managers are also low status, an assumption bolstered by the difficulties many community managers have in affecting the changes their communities want and need. Further, the wages are not representative of the amount of time community managers actually spend working. More than 50 percent of Georgia-Zozeta Miliopoulou's (2021, p. 3138) brand community managers reported demands of unlimited availability by bosses, with some of Kerr and Kelleher's (2015) games community managers reporting overnight stays at the office and the requirement to "work flexibly across time zones including North America and Asia" (p. 189). I assume the presence bleed between work and home life has only gotten more confused in the years since the pandemic and the mass transition to work-from-home employment structures.

Lil Miquela's community managers seem positioned to fall somewhere between that of brand and games community managers in terms of labour experience and expectations. In effect, Miquela's community is the product, and building that out is key to her success as a product spokesperson. To make her as similar as possible to mainstream influencers, community

managers will need the autonomy to respond to and interact with followers quickly and how best seems fit in the instance. Replies need to believably come from the character as her content presents her, and community managers will need to be able to make creative choices about what works in her voice and what does not. They will be the ones most closely monitoring the follower reactions to Miquela's content and will have a more nuanced understanding of what content is and is not working. However, the forever-19 framing of the character pre-emptively resists the long-term community engagement games community managers aim for. Instead, it favours short-term interactions with a specific market segment, and content encouraging users to 'like and share' more so than discussion and deeper community engagement. In turn, this may reduce the amount and degree of emotional labour community managers engage with. The high secrecy of companies like Brud suggests they will not contract these roles out to other agencies and will instead keep community management in-house where they are able to adjust content strategies with more agility. The in-house nature of the work, and the comparatively limited scope of a virtual influencer's community demands when compared to that of popular games suggests Miquela's community managers may not experience the same kinds of demands on their time. The nearly month-long posting break taken on Miquela's Instagram account between December 2022 and January 2023 certainly suggests as much. However, if Miquela acts as a calling card product for Brud and the company is or becomes engaged in the development and management of virtual influencers for external clients the structure and demands of community management labour may change as they take on the demands of other brands.

Conclusion

The secretive nature of virtual influencer companies like Lil Miquela's owner Brud, make it challenging to evaluate the material conditions of their labourers. Using what we do

know about the experiences of workers in related fields, such as animation, games development, and community management, we can start to make some assumptions about what working for a virtual influencer company looks like. First, we can assume a certain amount of division of labour and a hierarchical structure that separates conceptual and creative work, whereby the animators, photographers, models, stylists, writers, and community managers tasked with bringing Miquela to life are not involved in creative decision-making. This hierarchy may be flattened within teams that create and manage less popular virtual influencers, but for a highly complex character like Miquela who maintains a presence across multiple social media platforms and a high output publishing schedule a hierarchically division of labour will remain.

Second, workers will experience some level of job precarity. Animation, games development, and the tech industries often work on project-based cycles. As one project winds down and another starts up, management will lay off surplus staff and those not appropriately skilled for the new project. The constant cycle of acquisitions and closures in these industries also means jobs are continually in flux. In fact, Miquela's owners Brud sold to the NFT production company Dapper Labs in late 2021, signalling a focus shift for the company away from virtual influencers and towards various web3 schemes (Hayward, 2021)[2]. While a Dapper Labs statement from the time said they would bring over "Brud's entire 32-person team" it is unclear how many of those people are still with the company today, or for how long they will be retained. All of this comes in the face of the continuing decline of key web3 markets like NFTs and cryptocurrencies (Greenberg, 2023; Wallerstein, 2022). The sex appeal of a new and novel industry which supposedly allows workers to blend creative passions with new technologies and offers the possibility for small-time creatives to become the next big thing will further increase

[2] See Chapter Two this thesis for definitions of NFTs, web3, and other related technologies. Chapter Two also features a discussion on how Brud and Miquela interact with and make use of these technologies.

job precarity in the virtual influencer industry. Workers who find the low pay and job precarity untenable will be replaced. Someone else will always be ready to take their place, seduced by the opportunity to work in the industry they love, and if they are lucky, win a big payday if company shares reach a high. These factors allow employers to pay relatively low wages and devalue the labour of individuals workers.

Finally, the virtual influencer industry will alienate workers from the product of their labour. While one can make the argument that creatives are inherently tied to their production, when stripped of any autonomy over *how* to create alienation still occurs. Individual creatives will have little conceptual input over the end product (Miquela's posts, videos, music, and so on) and will instead be responsible for executing the vision of their managers.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

It is easy to think of Miquela as a novelty or simply one new link in a long line of advertising trends. However, as my thesis shows, she also represents the arrival of a new and highly exploitative industry. The most obvious line of questing regarding virtual influencers is to ask how Miquela will be used to exploit social media users. Most of the people I have spoken to about her quickly turn to questions of ethics. Will people know she is not real? Does she represent new and effective means of deceptive marketing? Will her unrealness further reinforce unhealthy social comparison habits practiced by teen girls? Will authoritarian regimes use virtual influencers in psyops; can terrorists use them for radicalization? Does she represent the accelerated acceptance of intimate human-technology relationships? These lines of questioning all suggest that Miquela and her ilk are suspect, and we should not trust them. I wanted to resist this reading for two reasons.

First, this relies on common assumptions about the media literacy of everyday people. Media scholars tend to underestimate the ability for people, especially young people, to 'correctly' read the media (Livingstone, 1996). We assume that as media scholars we are better positioned than other people to understand and detangle the more manipulative characteristics of media content. To an extent this is true, but while this elevates our own skills, it does not reduce the abilities of others. Certainly, social media echo chambers, political polarization and entrenchment, and an increasingly sophisticated media industry focused on deceiving audiences means good media literacy is as difficult a skill to cultivate as ever. However, and again, this does not mean people, and especially young people, are not keenly aware of the ways media can deceive them.

Second, the material changes virtual influencers bring to social media strike me as minimal. Influencers and brands already participate in dishonest advertising practices; radicalization via social media content is already broadly discussed by regulators and social media platforms alike; people online are already not who they present themselves to be. Internet users know they need to be critical about what they see in their social media feeds. The addition of a cartoon girl cosplaying as a Gen Z cool kid on Instagram is not going to make them lower their guard. The deep suspicion my friends have expressed about Lil Miquela proves this. Nothing that appears on Miquela's feed feels any more insidious than the use of cartoon mascots as a marketing vehicle for any other consumer products. Making children and young people feel as if they *need* whatever product advertisers are selling them to feel fulfilled is the baseline of the advertising industry. Miquela is part of a larger capitalist project determined to funnel as much economic wealth into as few hands as possible. She is not, in my estimation, a brave new vector in deceptive marketing, but a novel approach towards capturing the attention of consumers in an entirely oversaturated market of online product endorsers and the many, many products they shill. Marketers are hopeful the novelty of the thing will be enough to keep the interest of young women with an interest in fashion, anime, and the generalized glamour of social media stardom. The system is bad to begin with, virtual influencers are just more of the same. Miquela may represent new and different forms of user deception and exploitation, but not necessarily worse ones. I encourage future work challenging my assumptions, but those assumptions nonetheless drive the work presented here.

Instead, I choose to examine what Miquela means for labour within the market she represents. If the outward facing aims of Miquela's creators seemed obvious to me, how they planned to achieve those goals did not—particularly from a labour perspective. Influencers are

already a highly effective form of social media marketing, and despite the difficult and time-consuming labour of cultivating an online following, influencers remain cheap labour. Do businesses really think they could replicate or exceed the sales abilities of human influencers in a way that would yield meaningful capitalist rewards like reduced costs or improved revenues? While the prospects seem unlikely to me, industry insiders believe otherwise. Influencer marketing firm HypeAuditor (2022) claims virtual influencers enjoy "three times as many interactions on Instagram as regular users," and are cheaper to work with than human influencers since virtual influencers can attend events anywhere in the world "without having to pay for a trip." However, it was another one of HypeAuditor's so-called benefit of working with virtual influencers that truly revealed the value of virtual influencers to me: virtual influencers enable "possession of total ownership of the brand." Virtual influencers are a matter of control. This thesis examines the flows of control and exploitation of workers in the virtual influencer industry.

Chapter Three opened the discussion with an exploration of how the advertising industry exploits human influencers and in what ways virtual influencers help further entrench that control. As a passion driven class of workers, influencers are highly exploitable. Excitement about working in a desirable industry, and the potential for widespread internet fame and a glamourous lifestyle encourages early career influencers to forego payment in the present for the slim possibility of much greater rewards in the future. In this system exposure, free products, or entry to exclusive events act as payment for influencer labour. Monetary exchange rarely enters the conversation. This system favours advertisers who have benefitted from cheap access to the strong levels of trust followers have in their favourite influencers.

However, the situation is evolving, and new developments have started to change the relationship between brands and influencers. Social media platforms like Instagram have tightened their disclosure policies, requiring creators on their platforms to tell followers when their posts are part of an advertising campaign. Influencers have traditionally avoided disclosure, as marking a post as sponsored can have a drag on follower trust. However, failing to disclose their partnerships has consequences now as well. Creators that do not comply with platform disclosure policies can have their accounts restricted or their reach reduced, limiting their usefulness as spokespeople (Meta, n.d.).

Public opinion around influencers is changing, as well. "The Facebook Papers" (Wells et al., 2021) revealed that nearly one-third of teen girls who use Instagram said the social network increased dissatisfaction with their body image. Constantly comparing themselves to the beauty standards set by the platform's most popular users had taken a toll on their perceptions of self. At the same time, controversies surrounding individual influencers are also increasing, as powerful advertisers dropped popular YouTubers like PewDiePie for spewing hate speech and engaging in other distasteful actions (Fritz, 2017). In the face of these revelations, brands have become more conservative in their partnerships, seeking out only the safest influencers to work with.

While tightening control around messaging and partnerships has helped advertisers maintain power structures to some extent, their power has nonetheless begun to slip. The most popular influencers now command a level of trust and power over their followers akin to that of the world's most successful brands. When a social media user buys a product on an influencer's recommendation, consumers put their trust back into the influencer, not the brand. The buyer may love the brand name sneakers they just bought, but instead of taking that as a sign to buy more products from the same brand, they further increase their trust in the influencer's

purchasing advice. For some advertisers, influencers have come to represent an existential crisis in which the scales of power now tip in favour of influencers.

These three intersecting conditions—stricter influencer policies, public attention on influencer controversies, and increasing influencer power—have pushed brands to look for novel ways to reign in control over the advertising industry. To that end, Miquela is the logical conclusion. Virtual influencers are at the time of writing this thesis not meaningfully regulated, giving advertiser more leeway in obscuring their intentions; they are less likely to become embroiled in controversy over hateful or otherwise derisive comments; and any power the influencer gathers as an individual entity is ultimately held by their corporate owners. It is a nice pitch, but does it work?

Chapter Four examined virtual influencers as a labour replacing technology. Simply put, if virtual influencers cannot replicate the kinds of successful relationship and intimacy building human influencers can with their followers, virtual influencers will fail in their stated goal of being strong product spokespeople. To build these relationships, virtual influencer creators look to replicate the content created by popular and successful human influencers.

Influencer social media content has become a genre. It is now a reproducible format of content with a known set of follower expectations which skilled writers can work from. As long as Miquela uses the influencer genre convincingly, followers will stay hooked, regardless of her fictious nature. People already develop deep and intimate relationships with the fictional characters in their favourite media, and the ability to make audiences empathise with a character has long been the hallmark of good fiction writing. This is in addition to a tradition of digital avatars as representatives of singular human users. In multiplayer videogames personalized digital avatars represent all users, a practice that has bled out to digital communications more

broadly (see the use of Bitmojis on snapchat, Memojis on iPhones, and NFT avatars on Twitter). As digital spaces like *Fortnight, Roblox,* and other so-called metaverse spaces become important meeting spaces for young people, digital representations of the self will become increasingly important to these users. When real people are already choosing to represent their selves online in the form of digital avatars, it does not matter if Miquela is real, it just matters that she fits in. Fitting in is not effortless for humans or avatars, but the people behind the scenes at Brud are working diligently to make Miquela seem like she belongs.

Finally, Chapter Five speculated on the labour of creating Miquela. There are a lot of assumptions in this chapter. It remains unclear how virtual influencer creators make and maintain their characters, or how the companies that own virtual influencers are structured, or what the treatment of workers at places like Brud is like. In the absence of primary data on the virtual influencer industry I relied on research focused on related industries and workers. I drew from literature on animation, games development, and community management workers. Miquela, I argue, represents a meeting place of these three industries as an animated character mapped onto a human body and presented as a sentient being on social media. Much like influencers, animators, developers, and community managers are often involved in aspirational labour (Duffy, 2018) and encouraged to accept low wages and precarious work conditions for the privilege of being able to work in an industry they are passionate about. In each case, worker autonomy is low, with little opportunity to make conceptual decisions or leave their fingerprints on the work. Their work is devalued and highly feminized.

Taken together, the arguments I have presented across my thesis point towards a capitalist system attempting to move labour out of sight of consumers. It is a system trying to

reduce costs and increase control. Virtual influencers are not designed to make users think they are real, they are designed to obscure the work that brings them to life.

RQ1: How does the advertising industry benefit from the shift from human influencers to virtual ones and the veiling of labour from users' view?

As the visibility and cultural significance of human influencers has grown, they have steadily wrestled power away from traditional advertisers. The most popular influencers now enjoy greater or equal consumer trust to that of the most popular brands and advertisers. Additionally, changing regulations in countries like the US, and especially the integration of influencers into the Screen Actors Guild have elevated the floor for influencer labour rights by providing them access to new legal protections and representation by a powerful union. In this way influencers now provide top-down and bottom-up pressure on brands and advertisers and represent an existential crisis for the industry's legacy player.

Moving towards virtual influencers allows brands and advertisers to recoup some of that power and consumer trust. In the most apparent sense, using corporately owned virtual influencers helps remove the competition, but on a more fundamental level, transitioning to virtual influencers also means moving towards a more exploitable class of workers. The people who do the labour of creating Miquela's and other virtual influencer's content are invisiblized, hidden behind a character they have no ownership over and very little conceptual reasonability for.

My following two research questions stem from the answers generated by the first. If this shift is to happen, we need to know how those who benefit will make it so. From there we must identify who the labourers are under the new system and how their exploitation will manifest.

RQ2: How do virtual influencer creators use existing genre and social media conventions to create successful replacements for human influencers?

The rise in popularity of influencer content has also led to the genre-fication of their content. When something becomes a genre, it becomes replicable. Successful influencers and the marketers that work with them now know exactly how to design content that encourages the development of intimate relationships between social media users and their favourite influencers. The sense of intimacy that followers have is key to an influencer's success as a product spokesperson, as this is what leads followers to trust influencers and act on their purchasing advice. For influencers to have long and prosperous careers, they must be able to develop and hold that sense of intimacy across time. Understanding intimacy building as a genre, as a repeatable form of content, allows them to do this.

These emerging genre conventions allow virtual influencers like Miquela to exist alongside and compete with human influencers. While becoming a genre means that creators can easily replicate influencers, it also establishes a set of follower expectations. If a creator or body of content hits on most of those expectations it goes a long way towards fulfilling the requirements for social media users to develop intimate relationships with an influencer, or in our case, a virtual influencer. Because of this, social media users do not need virtual influencers to be 'real' for them to be affective figures. Instead, virtual influencers only need to meet users' expectations of what an influencer is and how they act for users to see virtual and human influencers as effectively the same thing.

Beyond their reliance on influencer genres, virtual influencers also benefit from users' assumptions about digital avatars. Video games and some social media platforms like Snapchat have long used digital avatars as representations of their human users. This sets a precedent for

viewing digital avatars as analogous to singular human users, and social media users may carry those assumptions with them, tacitly or otherwise, when viewing Miquela and other virtual influencers.

The inter-related phenomena of influencer genre-fication and user assumptions about digital avatars create the conditions necessary for virtual influencers to exist and succeed as product spokespeople and as viable replacements for the current slate of human labourers. Of course, virtual influencers do not get rid of the need for human workers, but merely allow brands and advertisers to change who those workers are. This leads us to my final research question.

RQ3: Who are the new workers under this labour shift, and what forms of labour exploitation apply to them?

The simple fact is we do not know *who* the workers are that bring Miquela and other virtual influencers to life, nor do we know much about *how* they do their work. Companies like Brud reveal little about their processes and workforce, likely leading to the dearth of current research about workplaces and their workplace conditions. As argued in the answer to RQ1, this obfuscation is intentional. Virtual influencer companies do not want consumers to know who is behind their characters, lest that visibility allows their workers to effectively advocate for better labour conditions. A web of non-disclosure, non-disparagement, and non-compete agreements which legally prevent workers from discussing all but the most mundane aspects of their labour help Brud and others achieve these obsfutorial ends.

The inaccessibility of virtual influencer workers has left me to speculate on the nature of their labour. To address this gap, I grounded my research on industries I determined to have the most overlap with virtual influencer creation and management: animation, games development, and community management. Following the labour trends in these industries, virtual influencer

companies are likely manipulating workers into precarious and low-waged employment by convincing them they should accept low stability and income for the opportunity to work in an industry they are passionate about. Virtual influencer companies likely require their workers to hold unlimited availability while the constant threat of being replaced by workers who will do their job for even less stability and lower wages looms overhead. Historically, industries that try this hard to make their workers unseen are doing so for a reason. Most often, that reason is so bosses can exploit workers to the highest degrees possible. In my mind there is no reason to believe that is not what is happening here.

Looking forward

The influencer industry has always benefitted from labour exploitation. From its earliest days, brands have gained huge benefits from their use of influencers as cheap or free labour. As membership in industry unions looms on the horizon and influencers amass more cultural and economic capital, the brands and marketers that employ them are looking for ways to swing the balance of power back in their direction. In this thesis I have argued that the use of virtual influencers is one way that brands and marketers are trying to do this. By moving towards virtual influencers, advertisers replace one class of increasingly powerful labourers (human influencers) for the invisiblized and highly exploitable group of workers tasked with making virtual influencers like Miquela. It is a transition made in the interests of the wealthy at the expense of the labourers who work in this new industry. More than anything, virtual influencers represent an attempt for big brands, advertisers, and marketers to keep labour cheap and maintain control over the advertising industry.

Despite my general pessimism, future research should challenge my assumptions. The nature of my work in this thesis is speculative and primary accounts from workers in the industry

will be the only way to understand what is truly happening behind the scenes. The prevalence of NDAs in the tech industries more broadly makes conducting this kind of primary research difficult. As the industry matures it may become easier to find workers who are willing to talk, but we do not appear to be at that point yet. Certain assumptions presented in my research suggest working in the virtual influencer industry is more comfortable than the industries I have compared it to. The secretive nature of virtual influencer companies means precarious contract work may be undesirable, keeping employee turnover low ensures less chances for insider information to leak out. Additionally, Miquela's month-long posting hiatus from December 2022 to January 2023 suggests workers may have reasonable working hours. However, the cynic in me marks any business so obsessed with secrecy as suspect.

Another potential area for research is virtual influencers use as political actors. In recent years, human influencers have taken up activist positions for numerous causes, from support for the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Thomas & Fowler, 2023), to spreading COVID disinformation (Abidin et al., 2021). Recently, several TikTokers promoting military recruitment have risen in popularity as well (Yalcinkaya, 2023). While the advertising industry may see influencers chiefly as product spokespeople, their social sway extends far beyond the realm of consumer goods. Miquela's creators published several posts supporting the BLM movement to her Instagram profile for instance, and virtual influencers like bee_nfluencer make activism their whole brand. It seems likely there are yet other virtual influencers working towards more nefarious ends as well. Future research should explore how virtual influencers fit into both pro- and anti-social activism. As framed by the HypeAuditor report, virtual influencers (whom they refer to as "opinion leaders") may be even better suited to so-called thought influencing campaigns than product marketing:

> Because of how popular these opinion leaders have become, they get three times as many interactions on Instagram as regular users. A recent study found that more than half of the respondents surveyed (58%) follow at least one CGI influencer. They follow a virtual influencer for many different reasons, such as to get content (27%), stories (19%), and inspiration (15%). Although the trend of using digital natives as spokesmen has not caught on in the West to the same extent as in Asia, it has grown enormously there. The meta-human idol market is expected to grow from $4.6 billion in 2015 to close to $5.8 billion by 2030. Most of this growth will happen in China. (HypeAuditor, 2022)

The growth of virtual influencers in the global context is another area for potential research. This thesis looks at the industry from a distinctly American perspective, focused on the North American market leader, Brud. However, virtual influencers are a global phenomenon and enjoy elevated positions of popularity and status in places like Brazil and China. A good starting place would be an integration of the research that is already happening in these countries and others into the English language discussion on the topic. Moving forward it will be important to watch how virtual influencers are changing international relations and labour practices.

Research on virtual influencers can also be used to challenge widely held assumptions about how human influencers gain popularity online. During my thesis defence one of my committee members asked why I did not discuss how virtual influencers deal with the issue of authenticity. Readers familiar with influencer studies may find themselves asking the same thing. My answer here, as it was there, is that authenticity does not seem to me to be the right way to think about virtual influencers—at least not in the way we often think about it. In influencer studies, authenticity is used to describe how close the persona performed by an influencer is to their supposedly ‘real’ offline selves (Marwick & boyd, 2011). While researchers like Abhinav

Choudhry et al. (2022) have found that social media users find virtual influencers less authentic than human ones, I question whether measuring the authenticity of virtual influencers the same way we do human influencers is appropriate. The affective powers of fictional characters are not tied to how well they represent their creators, but by how well they represent a certain kind of person in the abstract. This abstraction means audiences can still read characters with exaggerated or overly simplistic character traits as relatable figures. Empathetic and skilled writers can create authentic characters who have little to nothing to do with their embodied experiences. The fact is that Miquela is an authentic representation of the kind of person she represents. It seems likely to me that when social media users are aware of a virtual influencer's fictitious nature they will evaluate them the same ways they do other fictional characters, and not hold them to the same authenticity standards as human influencers. Given that human influencers also often invent public facing personas or play characters, it may be worth re-thinking how we talk about authenticity in influencer studies more broadly as well.

The projected market growth of virtual influencers has benefits for me as well. Coming into this project I worried that we were on the tail-end of a fad, that virtual influencers would mostly disappear by the time I finished my thesis work, and that what remained of the industry would be small and mostly insignificant. I worried my critiques of the industry would be irrelevant by the time I completed them. These concerns were not without merit. Brud had stopped posting to the Instagram accounts of their other two virtual influencers (@blawko22 and @bermudaisbae) in September of 2020, and even their star child, Miquela, had been slowly losing followers on Instagram since that time. Miquela's growth on platforms like TikTok offsets her Instagram falloff to some degree though the future of that platform is also uncertain, as US lawmakers debate how to deal with Chinese-owned social media networks (Maheshwari &

Holpuch, 2023). In addition to this, the general failure of metaverse technologies to get off the ground, increasing pessimism around associated web3 technologies, and the collective fatigue of a global pandemic—where communicating with friends and loved ones happened primarily through digital technologies—left the new forms of digital self-representation that virtual influencers represented feeling more oppressive than liberating.

When Brud sold in late 2021 it seemed as if the industry's biggest player was getting out of the game. The publication of a report estimating the continued growth of virtual influencers globally gives me confidence that my work will still carry some relevancy now that it is completed, even as I recognize that means an extension of the precarious and alienating labour practices I accuse the industry of promoting.

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